UNIVERSITY
OF FLORIDA
LIBRARIES

COLLEGE LIBRARY

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
LYRASIS Members and Sloan Foundation

http://archive.org/details/womenofchampionc00unse

The Women of Champion City

DORIS DAVIS
51-7928

The Women of Champion City

WILLIAM SLOANE
ASSOCIATES, INC.
Publishers *New York*

Copyright, 1951, by
DORIS DAVIS

First Printing

Typography and format designed by
LEONARD W. BLIZARD

Manufactured in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in Canada
by George J. McLeod, Ltd., Toronto

Contents

NADINE WILDRAVEN

CASSANDRA: *Gift of Prophecy* 3

CASSANDRA: *Evening at the Kumquat May* 14

CASSANDRA: *Desertion in Ohio* 21

NADINE: *Christmas AWOL* 28

LIEUTENANT FROM TAMPA: *Fortunes of War* 40

CASSANDRA: *Amok 1945* 46

CASSANDRA BICKHAM

CASSANDRA: *A Day in the Life of an Innkeeper* 53

CASSANDRA: *Raydella Rose Maygrew and the Old Grad* 66

CASSANDRA: *Backwash* 76

RANDALL: *Heavy Date* 82

NADINE: *Pick-Ups* 96

NADINE: *At the Beach* 114

RANDALL: *Fair Exchange* 121

RANDALL: *The Wooing of Nadine Wildraven* 132

CASSANDRA: *When April with Its Sweet Breath* 141

NADINE: *The Imprint* 151

CASSANDRA: *The Colonel and Mrs. Flugleman* 169

RANDALL: *Some Blessed Narcotic* 179

REUNION IN CHAMPION CITY

CASSANDRA: *Sky Fall* 191

NADINE: *Reunion in Champion City* 198

RANDALL: *Cap and Bells* 209

CASSANDRA: *At the Point of a Gun* 215

DELANEY: *Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow* 221

RANDALL: *Hangover* 224

STEVEN WILDRAVEN

STEVEN: *The Husband* 231

NADINE: *The Man on the Bed* 240

CASSANDRA: *Black Char* 243

Nadine Wildraven

CASSANDRA: *Gift of Prophecy*

THE WIND WAS BLOWING FROM THE NORTH, NOT IN gusts or blasts, but steadily, relentlessly, the way it does when a cold snap starts moving in. The palms along Sunset Shore Road were kowtowing to the south in a most monotonous fashion. The sky was dull blue, without clouds, and across the road, beyond the grove, the bay fumed into an ugly slate gray. It was not at all the sort of day I would select to begin the Season. My newly arrived guests were sure to be cold and pinched at the nose, muttering at me as though I had personally cheated them.

Well, I tried. I hoped hard all summer through the drought and all fall through the hurricanes for a serene and sun-drenched winter. I hadn't quite resigned myself to every innkeeper's eternal frustration from weather and hired help. In this optimistic year I planned to play gracious hostess; no duties more strenuous than replenishing ice water and breaking out bridge tables. But instead, the north wind blew, the new maid deserted without notice, and the housework fell to my lot.

"Oh, what next!" I said to Delaney, coming out on the terrace after my day's stint. "That wretched maid was al-

ways singing 'Lordy, Lordy, lay my burden down!' Lordy dropped it right on my back."

I was talking to myself. Delaney lay stretched upon my favorite chaise, steamer robe wrapped about his knees, the picaresque novel of the month riding astride his stomach. He told me he'd sat up most of the night reading, but of course nothing could keep Delaney awake in daytime. Delaney was my clerk. Blond as cream, arrogant of nose, hypersensitive of mouth; young, 4-F. His long psychic fingers curled innocently upon the blanket; cigarettes spilled from his breast pocket.

I don't know why I put up with Delaney. The warped maternal urge of a childless woman, I suppose; a weak and worthless clerk. I let the screen door slam and went to walk around the patio, examining the plantings and looking for buds on the poinsettias. I ended back by the terrace fingering the leaves of a little kumquat tree which wasn't doing so well. Delaney had one eye open, and now he stretched his arms apparently to twice their length.

"As a purely academic question," he said over a cavernous yawn, "why don't you pull the thing up?"

"It came with the place!" I exclaimed. "It's part of the name."

Delaney thought awhile. "That may be what's wrong with it!"

I laughed. Delaney amused me, which was probably why I put up with him. I reconciled myself to a low slat chair, punching a pillow in behind my back. I felt good, now that the work was through, to have done it myself. "But how will I ever manage? Here it is three o'clock in the aft-

ernoon, and I've only just changed clothes!"

"Maybe it'll take some of the pompano off you," Delaney remarked unfeelingly.

"I'm not so heavy," I protested. "They're just cutting clothes smaller these days." I calculated painfully the toll of my five years under the Florida sun: from size fourteen to eighteen, and my blonde upsweep more like a haystack every day. I said, "It's this obscene climate. All northern women gain weight down here."

"Oh, sure-sure-sure," said Delaney. "Did you ever try keeping your mitts out of the icebox?"

"By the way," I said, one gloomy thought following another, "you haven't spotted the little gentleman in Number Five, have you? I didn't see him come out. I hope he's not sick." I hate sick guests.

"He came out. Went weaving down the street, running into palms and lifting his hat to apologize."

"Oh no, Delaney, not that! I thought he was one of those old cormorants who stand all day on the causeway and fish!"

The patio was cupped in calm, protected from the wind partially by the row of my five cottages and the high hedge of oleanders, and beyond that by the Paradise Barbecue which ran the length of my lot on the other side of the drive. I could hear from the service yard the giggles of my two beefy shell-maker ladies, as they hung out oversized panties and stockings in the streaming wind. They were tenants of Number Seven, one of the big rooms upstairs. Overhead a loose awning flapped, and the tall palms sur-

rounding the lodge bent and rattled dried fronds. But the plant leaves in the patio steeped all unstirred in the pale sun.

From Sunset Shore Road, where the sidewalk runs along our side of the street only, came the firm rapid clickety-click of high heels. Delaney turned delighted looks upon me. "A northerner!" he cried. "Only a northerner walks like that." The footsteps materialized into a girl, who stopped and stared full view into the Kumquat May. "A customer," murmured Delaney. "I'd know that strained and wistful look anywhere. Front and center, boy!" And he bounded out of his blanket and through the door into the lobby, ostensibly for his post behind the office counter.

The girl came slowly up the walk, eyeing the place, eyeing me. I glanced at her intently enough to gather an impression of medium height, good carriage, dark eyes, and a face rosy from the wind. But something was wrong. Unlike so many of the young women who hounded me those days, she didn't look brightly expectant and she wasn't aggressive. Diffident, was the word. She hasn't been around much, I concluded.

She stood in front of me and pushed her blown hair away from her eyes. "Is there——"

"Clerk's inside," I said, indicating the door with a motion of my head. She went in. I sat owlishly looking over my lot. . . . It was now the end of the year 1944, and I was a little weary of the young. Florida overflowed with them. Every day one of them berated me. Didn't I know there was a war on? They were separated from their males.

Life, the movies, the ladies' magazines, had betrayed them. As one of the older generation whose fault the whole thing was, it was up to me to take them in. I scowled as I followed with my eye the growth of bougainvillea vine up the outside steps to the balcony. . . . No, they didn't want to pay Florida prices! They couldn't afford that. Where was my patriotism? Why shouldn't I go cheerfully to pot for my country, furnish a happy breeding ground, hamburgers on smuggled grills, kiddie pens in the lobby, diapers in the washbowls, soldiers and wives between the sheets. I stared at the scarred polish on my nails and twitched a sore muscle at my back.

Delaney burst out the door and came to stand over me, spreading his hands. "Cass, won't you fix her up somehow?"

"No."

"But she's pretty! Think how she would grace the sundeck!"

"Tell her we're full up."

"She can have the other bunk in my room! She can even share——"

"Don't be puerile."

"Heck!"

Delaney cast me a look of disgust as he went back in. In another moment the girl reappeared, stepping cautiously through the doorway and closing the screen softly behind her. She walked to the edge of the terrace staring straight ahead. For an instant she hesitated, before taking the step down. She swallowed and drew breath, and—oh, oh! a tear

spilled over and went coursing down her cheek. Too bad. She hadn't wanted me to see.

Unmoved and unrelenting, feeling nice and hard inside, I watched her march out to the street. A tremor seized her shoulders. She wasn't going to be able to hold back sobs. So what was it to me, I argued with myself, if some dumb female insisted on following her soldier boy all over the face of the globe? . . . But the girl was certainly not dumb. Her face had quality. . . . Come off it, I said. She's got a home somewhere. Why didn't she stay there? . . .

I saw her turn northward up the street, whirl sharply to catch her breath, and face up again, the orange feather on her hat whipped alive like a tropical bird. "Just look!" I thought. "No creature of nature goes against the wind like that, head high, tears streaming, except woman."

Beyond the Paradise Barbecue was one other hotel, but it would be full also. After that the places on this road were few and far between, a waste of time and tired feet. Really, it was too bad to let her go on. The girl was half a block up the street. I ran after her into the wind and touched her arm. "Look," I said, breathlessly. "You can't walk up Sunset Shore Road crying your eyes out! You'll give Florida a bad name."

The girl wheeled angrily. "Let me alone!" Just then Delaney bolted out of the patio and came pounding up to join us. He jumped in front of the girl. "Don't go!" he said. "Maybe old lady flintheart here will weaken and find you a room."

"At least come with me and talk it over," I said. She

lifted her chin stubbornly, but then, weary and confused, between Delaney and me, as though not knowing what else to do, she came traipsing back.

I led her through the lobby to my own apartment, closing the door in Delaney's face. "Take off your coat. Sit down," I said, waving around my cubicle of a living room. The girl looked about doubtfully and perched herself on the edge of the studio couch. She loosened her collar. "I'll not take it off," she said. "I'm cold."

"Not so loud! The Chamber of Commerce might hear. This is Champion City! We don't give a fig for Naples, Los Angeles, or Cairo. Our climate's the best in the world—that's what it says in the ads." I called part of this from the cupboard in the adjoining kitchen, as I rummaged for a bottle. I thought sherry might do her more good than tea. When I make a gesture I never know when to stop. I came back with two generous wine glasses. "Bristol Cream!" I said, offering her one. If I expected her face to light with preternatural joy, I was dashed. She took a dubious sip. "I'm really grateful to you," I chattered on, settling into an armchair, "because I only permit myself to break this out on matters of near life and death."

Delaney was right. The girl was pretty. She glanced at me levelly. Her eyes were brown with level, dark eyebrows. Her hair, although tangled from the wind, curled fine and dark and lustrous about the brim of her little hat. She wore a plain straight coat with a velvet collar. I noticed, as she crossed her ankles, the small feet in sturdy high-heeled pumps. Her figure was good, unexpectedly deep-breasted.

She took another sip of sherry and unfastened the second button on her coat. "This is good," she said, nodding a late response. She pushed back more comfortably against the pillows. She had small capable square hands, without nail polish. Her lipstick was worn off except for a faint orange rim. She was not, after all, so very young.

I said, "I'm sorry about the room. I'd give you one if I had it."

"I know. I didn't mean to be so childish. I don't understand what got into me."

"You've been pounding pavements for days, I suppose."

"Yes. I'm at one of the big hotels, but I can't afford it much longer." She spoke in a low shy tone. Her eyes began to move restlessly about the room as she took on animation. "But all places are expensive. And most are horrid. I found one room, back over an old barn, with a wood-stove and a sagging painted bed. It was worth maybe two dollars a week. And they asked thirty-five! The landlady said it had a view of the bay—and so it did, if you hung out of the window by your toes."

"That's my Florida!" I cried, pleased to see her come alive in her indignation, with her cheeks still burning brightly from the wind.

"I thought the gulf side would be cheaper," said the girl, "but I don't see how——"

"C'est la guerre," I said, thereby exhausting all my French. I saw the band on the girl's finger. "Your husband at the Air Base?"

"No. I'm by myself."

"Is he overseas?"

"No. That is, I don't think so. You see—we've separated." She looked embarrassed.

"You needn't explain," I said. "I've lost several husbands myself."

"Several!"

"Well, three. It gets to be a habit."

The girl finished her sherry. "I didn't have any place to go," she told me. "And I always wanted to see Florida."

I said, "I don't mean to be inquisitive. But I was just considering." I was thinking to myself, here's this unhappy girl down here on a venture, trying to forget something. Soon, very soon, she won't be able to stand it, and she'll head back north.

"I'm from Ohio," she went on, beginning to smile. "The clerk at my hotel seemed terribly disgusted about it. He said everyone is from either Ohio or New Jersey."

"It is a fact," I said. "Ohioans come honking down like geese every winter!" I stood up and took her empty glass. She started to button her coat as though she thought I meant her to leave. I made my decision. I said, "I have a spare room in this apartment which I don't ordinarily rent. I might let you use it temporarily."

The girl blinked in surprise. "Oh I don't want to impose——" she began.

"Come look at it," I said, leading the way. We went through the kitchen into the minute hallway. "That's my room overlooking the patio," I waved to the left. "And this on the right is the guestroom—with a splendid view of the service yard!" It was a square, ordinary bedroom with maple furnishings, a Navaho-type rug, and tangerine curtains,

all of which came with the place when I bought it. Yet it was rather bright and pleasant.

"It's too nice," said the girl, her face falling in disappointment. "I'm sure I couldn't afford it."

"Oh, yes, you can," I said recklessly. "OPA caught me before I could get the price up. I can ask only ten dollars a week."

She looked at me questioningly, her embarrassment returning. "I wouldn't know how to thank you——" she began.

I wasn't listening. I had a horrid thought. The room was not registered with the rent board. Now it would have to be posted at that ridiculous price and I'd be stuck with it. I conducted the girl back through the apartment and out into the lobby, setting her about the business of registering. Delaney, not to be outdone, offered to drive her in my station wagon, with thin tires and a starvation diet of gas rationing, to get her bags from the hotel. I examined the register in order to fix him with a dirty look.

" 'Nadine Wildraven,' " I read out loud. "What a nice name!"

"Nice name for a nice girl," Delaney chirped.

She was exhilarated by the wind and the wine and the luck of the new room, but now the compliments seemed to make her sad. Her smile faded and her eyes darkened. As she turned to leave with Delaney, she said, "I hope you'll never be sorry you took me in."

I leaned back against the counter, beaming after her, idly swinging the desk pen by its chain. Delaney was making a show of manners, bowing as he held the screen. He

dropped a deferential pace behind her, appraising her legs. A minute or so later I heard the station wagon choking on cheap gasoline as it went out the drive. My smile froze.

"Now!" I thought, distractedly jabbing the pen back into its holder. "I wonder what I've let myself in for."

CASSANDRA: *Evening at the Kumquat May*

NO MATTER HOW OFTEN I WENT THROUGH IT, THE LULL at holiday time always deceived me. The lodge seemed so peaceful, the guests so pleasant. Two days before Christmas—that was half a month after Nadine's coming—I went lavish with bowls of fruits and nuts, and lighted fat pine candles. I put on a big Yule log and by the time I came out of my apartment in the evening it was blazing handsomely. The lobby seemed roomy and cheerful, with white walls and blue carpet and cane furniture upholstered in plaid. Nadine sat at one end of the sofa, listening quietly to the talk. It also pleased me to see that Corsie Ral had come in and was sitting beside her. Corsie was the little native Florida girl from my Number One cottage. I smiled and nodded at her as I dropped into an armchair. She was my only year-'round tenant. Her husband was overseas and she worked at the Air Base. She seldom mingled with the guests. But in the day's mail she had received a batch of five letters and the exhilaration doubtless drove her to seek company. I thought how fresh and young the two girls looked. Nadine was wearing coral ear-

rings, which the shell-maker ladies had given her, nice with her dark coloring. Corsie, with small blue eyes, and her hair cut short, was sitting up vivacious and fair.

Corsie was talking about things and people at the Base with the middle-aged Major from Number Four cottage, who had pulled up his chair nearby. She often rode to work with him, but the Major was vacating on December 31st because of the seasonal jump in rates. He threatened to take up my outrageous increase with the city council and the post command, and since then he hadn't spoken to me, not even to say hello. I felt sorry to lose him, for although he was a man of some spleen, he'd been quiet and neat. But business was business even in wartime, the soldiery were underpaid, and innkeepers had only three months to show a profit—and never the twain would agree.

Delaney came out from behind the counter to sprawl against the wall on a settee. He never just sat—always his legs must be thrust straight out, with weight on neck and tail, his feet a menace to traffic. A man and wife, transients, in from a day's fishing, stood at the fireplace warming themselves. And down the stairs trooped my shell-maker ladies, the Gleason sisters, glozing and triumphant after weeks of sending out boxes of grapefruit, shell jewelry, air plants, and cards scented with orange-blossom perfume.

"What a day!" puffed Dot. "Oh, my!"

"Our last-minute shopping!" Ernesta said. "I hope we didn't forget anyone!"

They settled their elephantine outlines on small straight chairs, sitting very close together. I had had trouble at first telling the sisters apart, with their tight permanent waves,

big dish faces and little pointy noses. But Dot's jaw was considerably the heavier, and Ernesta was the more effervescent.

The fisherman's wife, a swarthy woman in shirt, jeans, and heavy jacket, gave a brief nicker of a laugh. She said, "We took our vacation purposely to escape all that Christmas nonsense. We're holiday-haters!"

The Gleasons turned their pointy noses upon her in amazement.

"If you had children," spoke up the Major, whose chiffonier boasted gold-framed portraits of two scout-aged boys, "you'd feel quite differently about it."

The fisherman, who had been facing the fire, turned sharply. "I don't think we would at all!" In comparison with his wife's outfit, he looked quite jaunty in whipcord and suede jacket. "It's the principle of the thing!"

I sat forward on the alert, prepared to interject some tactful change of subject. But the fisherman's wife said impatiently, "Let's turn in, Hal. We've got to get up early." Her mouth twisted wryly as she glanced at the Major.

The Major waited until the couple had climbed the stairs out of sight. "Wonder why that fellow's not in the army," he said. Then, with a glance at his watch, he also rose, proclaiming by the set of his shoulders that men without children might fish on the morrow, but he had the war to run. He nodded goodnight to Corsie, Nadine, and the Gleasons, passing me cold-faced and scowling as he skirted Delaney's feet on the way out.

"Poor Major's homesick," said Corsie in her soft southern voice. Nadine was looking absently into the fire. I said

to the Gleasons, "You'll be leaving early in the morning, I suppose." They were taking a run over to Miami for the holidays. They nodded energetically, and Ernesta said, "We ought to go to bed too, but we're excited."

Dot asked Nadine, "Why don't you change your mind and go with us?"

"Oh, thank you, no," Nadine said, looking up. "I'd really rather not."

Dot went on worriedly, "I do hope our gas coupons hold out." And at this, Delaney, who was sitting with bored half-closed eyes, shifted on his settee, placing one leg over the other.

"If you ladies would snuggle up to Hobson Hawes next door at the Paradise, you could get all the gasoline you want."

"That nice man!" Dot said. "We just don't believe he's mixed up in the black market."

Ernesta gushed, "He's so kind! So attentive!"

"He's just trying to find out in which sock you keep your dough," Delaney said, glancing over at me and laughing.

The Gleasons bobbed their heads and smirked at such a shocking thought. Delaney unfolded himself and went behind the counter to close up. And just then, as forever happens in a hotel when someone's name is mentioned, Hobson Hawes himself, announced by loud belted jacket and hunter-green slacks, sauntered in off the terrace.

"Hi, Hobbie," Delaney said casually, a saluting finger to his forehead. Hobson included us all in a general grin, exposing gold bridgework. He was a big lumbering man, with coarse pores on his nose, and sparse wiry hair and eye-

brows. It was quite usual for him to wander in and out of the Kumquat May at will. The Gleason sisters' faces turned pink with pleasure, for while Hobson was a man of few words, everyone was ruggedly aware of his presence. He took the Major's chair, squatting forward, dropping his big knuckled hands between his knees. This evening he favored us with one sentence—and when Hobson said something it was always good and loud.

"Hear from your hubby?" he boomed to Corsie.

Corsie answered, babbling happily of the things her husband had written, quoting him as the final authority on all military affairs. Her husband had been in the African campaign and the invasion of Europe. Although his letters came in bunches, there were long days in between when none came at all. She bore her waiting with fortitude, pulling herself in, growing tense and quiet. She was intended to be plump over small bones, but it was too hard to get food past her throat during those long silences. When the letters came at last she gave way to fits of weeping and to eating sweets. She saved as much of her salary as she could and banked all money her husband sent, for a nest egg when he came home. I let her occupy her cottage all year at summer rates, because she had spunk and I wanted to keep her with me. She must have been besieged by soldiers for dates, since she was as cute as a button, but she never went out.

Hobson, a man who was never comfortable unless he was on his feet and doing something, sat back awkwardly; sharp eyes under the wispy brows taking in everything and

everybody. He listened for about fifteen minutes, then he got up and—with a special grin all for my very own—he went away.

"He is a nice man!" Ernesta declared, looking reproachfully at Delaney.

"We just often wonder what's on his mind," Dot said.

Corsie began to smile. "Haven't you guessed? Hobson has a crush on Cassandra!"

The sisters deflated, but they were agog again at once. "We thought you went with that other man!" Dot cried, turning upon me.

"That Mister Stanley Braden," Ernesta added, "the real estate man who we think is so distinguished!"

I felt my eyebrows elevate. It's always astonishing when others come out with their impression of your personal affairs. Corsie said, "She does. But Hobson Hawes is a patient man."

"Well," I said, repressing a shudder, "he's going to have a long wait."

Delaney was through for the night. He came out and stood in front of Nadine and Corsie. "If you want to go Dutch, you can come along with me downtown for a sandwich."

Corsie, still animated by the five fat letters crackling in her purse, turned to Nadine. "I'll go if you'll go!"

Delaney waited on the terrace while the girls went to their rooms for coats. Nadine called out, "See you later," as they left.

"Such cute girls!" Ernesta sighed after them.

"We're especially fond of Nadine," commented Dot. "But we're so afraid she's brooding. Has she told you her troubles?"

"Not a word," I said.

"We just know it's her husband!" said Dot. "That wicked man, what could he have done?"

"I wish she'd go along with us through the Everglades. She could see the alligators!" Ernesta said.

The Gleasons heaved themselves up and moved slowly toward the foot of the stairs. I rose also and waited to begin straightening the lobby. Dot turned back to me, her mouth quivering. "Does she never get a letter?"

"I believe not," I replied.

"Isn't that sad!" said Ernesta, pressing her hand to her bosom. "And there's Corsie Ral, not half so pretty, gets all those love letters!"

Dot took hold of the newel post and planted a stout oxford on the step. "Ernesta and I have led very secluded lives," she announced. "Mama kept us home when we were girls, and then poor Papa was an invalid for so long. We know we have missed many good things." Ernesta at her side set up an echoing sigh. "But," Dot added with some firmness, "we often say, we have missed a lot of trouble too!"

CASSANDRA: *Desertion in Ohio*

I LIED TO THE GLEASON SISTERS. I DID KNOW SOMETHING about Nadine. That very morning she had come out of her room late, still wearing pajamas and robe, with smudges under her eyes. "How bright it is!" she complained, frowning as she looked over the kitchen. I poured coffee. We sat at the table under the corner casement windows. Ordinarily, I did not board my guests, but since Nadine was living in my apartment I decided she might as well eat with me. I was fond of my red floor, blue walls, and yellow curtains, with plants in Mexican pottery lined along the broad sills. I said defensively, "It's the best room in the house."

"Up north," she replied, "it would still be gray and gloomy, with lights on!" And she said it as though that were a fine prospect! "Oh, Cass," she cried then, "I'm so homesick!"

I asked, gently, "Would it help to go home?"

"There's nothing left! Everything's sold and gone."

I said in surprise, "But how long ago did you leave your husband?"

"I didn't. He left me. It's been over a year. I know it's

silly the way I mope. But I mean to stop it!" She stood up impatiently and went back to her room to dress.

Nadine stuck near me all day as though she were lonely, helping me with the work. I was still without a maid, and we didn't finish the rooms until after lunch. In the afternoon I walked with her across the road to sit by the cove. The bay dipped sharply into the shoreline, well protected by a rise of ground and a thick grove of palms. The waters, out beyond, were cold and still chopped by the north wind. But the shallow, sheltered inlet gathered the sun's warmth, and when we came down the path from the rise, the basin was filled with splashing fish.

"Look!" I cried. "I've never seen so many!"

We sat on a bench near the water's edge, pulling up our skirts to brown our legs. A silver fish leaped almost at our feet. Nadine brushed glistening drops of water from her shins. "They're having fun, those fish," she said.

"You say it very glumly!"

She slumped forward, her hands at her knees. "I came to Champion City to have a good time. But I don't seem to know how to go about it."

"Just drift along," I advised. "It will come to you."

She lifted her eyes then in one of those direct brown looks. "Will you let me stay here, Cass? For the whole winter?"

I didn't even hesitate. "Of course," I said. "I like having you." I was surprised myself to find I meant it.

Nadine reached down and picked up a small scalloped shell. She examined it closely. "If I could only understand

why Steve left me," she said softly, "maybe I could get over him better."

"You mean you don't know!"

She shook her head. "Not really. When the war separated us, he said he was never coming back. He said I must make a new life for myself."

"Maybe he was upset about going into the army."

"Yes, he was. He was afraid he'd make a poor soldier. But it was more than that! Something was eating him. He wanted to break away from me."

"Another woman?"

Nadine frowned. She dropped the shell back to the sand. "It couldn't be," she said slowly. "I know he loved me."

I puzzled over that. "What kind of man was he?" I asked.

"Oh he was nice, he was attractive!" she said quickly. She smiled and gave a little shrug. "At least I thought so. We'd been married for thirteen years. I was always crazy about him."

"Thirteen years," I repeated. That was a long spell.

Nadine nodded. "I was only seventeen when I met him. He was still in college." She looked at me and smiled again. "Do you remember when you were that age how sophisticated college boys seemed?"

"Do I!" I exclaimed. "No man ever again looks so good!"

"My knees shook," Nadine confessed, "and from that minute I didn't have any more mind of my own than a rabbit."

We were silent awhile, watching the rings in the water

spread and overlap. Nadine said, "I've thought and thought, trying to figure things out. I've done more thinking in the year since Steve left me than I did the whole time we were married. I let him decide everything. Maybe it would have been better if I'd quarreled with him—relieved some of his tension." She stared out across the bay. "I don't know what happened. It seemed to me we were happy, until the war came. We had hard years at first, but it couldn't have been that. Lots of couples have bad times." She turned to me, explaining. "We lived in Cleveland when we were first married. It was during the depression and Steve had trouble finding work. We were awfully poor." She shook her head as though it were beyond description. "But finally we moved to Claybourn, Ohio, and Steve had a good job there, in the office of a big motor parts plant."

Nadine was speaking more rapidly now, glancing across the water, then back, inquiringly, at me. Suddenly she broke out, "I never could talk to anyone about Steve's leaving. Back home people condemned him terribly. I couldn't listen to them!" She said fiercely, as though she were about to burst, as though she demanded my understanding, "Steve was fine! He was kind! He was a misfit, I guess, in a way. You see he intended to be a teacher—a college professor! He made fun of himself about it when I first knew him, but really, underneath it meant a lot to him. And then, when he married me, he never even got to finish school. We were young and in love and we didn't use our heads. He had to go to work and give up all his plans. That's the part people never knew, because he

didn't complain, and he had pride and did his job well. He wasn't a good mixer. He didn't go in for sports and lodges and all the stuff they make so much of in little towns. I know our friends thought he was odd. He read a lot and took walks at night. He studied philosophy—that's what he liked best. He never discussed it, because people think that's queer. And he couldn't talk to me, because I didn't understand it."

We fell silent again. The sun was making us warm. Nadine took her jacket off, but I kept mine draped over my shoulders since I hated to be burned. I said, with some impatience, "I can't make sweeping denouncements just because someone's broken a convention! I'm too much of a pariah myself, I guess." Evidently I'd said something Nadine wanted to hear.

She said, "I don't mean Steve was weak or sour. He had a strong personality, rather quiet. I didn't know he was so dissatisfied. Never once did he throw up at me what I'd cost him, that if it hadn't been for me he'd have gone on with teaching." She broke off, turning over her puzzle. "Steve dominated me. I guess I liked being the helpless little woman. It was like a drug."

Nadine had been at the Kumquat May now for over two weeks, quiet and unobtrusive in the apartment, pleasant to have around. I knew right along that she was emerging, in a soggy wet-butterfly stage, from distress. But I supposed it was just a quarrel or jealous hurt, that as soon as she dried and could flutter, she'd go back north. Now, it was more serious than I'd thought. She was adjusting to something permanent.

She said, "I think I must have failed Steve in some way——"

"Why say that?" I interrupted. "Probably it wasn't your fault at all!"

Her face had taken on a far-away look and she didn't answer me. "We had a maple tree in the front yard, and a garden, and a cat, and a fireplace, and Steve made the sun-room into a study. I liked having the house to myself during the day with Steve coming home to me in the evening. We went to dances and played bridge. It was enough for me. But I think Steve was often bored."

"No children?" I commented, purely statistically. But Nadine looked sad.

"No. I wish there had been. Maybe things would have been different."

"The divorce courts are full of people with children," I said dryly. "Did Steve ask for a divorce?"

"Yes. He told me I should divorce him. But I could never bring myself to it. He told me to sell everything and keep the money. He said he was all washed up. That he hated his life—" She stopped a moment before going on. "—and the compromises he'd made. That he despised his job. He said he had loved me terribly, but he didn't want me waiting on him to come back from the war, that he was through!"

I knew from the awful look on Nadine's face this was the first time she'd uncovered that speech to anyone. I shook my head and looked quickly away. "Well, that was putting it bluntly enough," I said in a flattened voice.

"At least he didn't just walk out and not come back—the way Gods' Noblest Creation has been known to do!"

Nadine said, "I was stunned for months. But finally I did sell my house and all my things. Not just because he told me to, but I couldn't stand it there any longer, with the town and the talk, and every room reminding me of him. I've never seen Steve since the day he told me he was leaving. His only letters have been to our lawyer. It's awful not to know what's happened to him, or if he's alive or dead, or sick or well!"

The fish were gone. The sun had withdrawn into a cool orange ball in the west. Nadine and I pulled our jackets around us.

"Do you understand it?" Nadine said. "Even if Steve meant to start over some way, why did he have to be rid of me?"

I was tired of sitting on the hard bench. I stood up and rubbed my backsides. I could have indulged myself in some expletive on men and marriage, but here was this girl, in bewilderment and woe, determined to blame herself. I stuck safely to platitude. "Who knows what a man might have to do to toughen himself for war?"

We gathered our things together and started up the path. Nadine said softly, "Do you think he might come back?"

I gave her a cynical glance. "Do they ever?"

"I guess not."

"Best try and forget him," I said. But she may not have heard. The wind took our voices at the top of the rise.

NADINE: *Christmas AWOL*

I HAD A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP AFTER I TOLD CASS ABOUT STEVE and me. I woke feeling light and airy. Instead of lying there the way I usually did, turning my face into the pillow, I got up at once, ran to the window and stuck out my head. The new day was brilliant and balmy warm. The north wind had stopped.

It was Sunday, the day before Christmas. Cass and I had the place to ourselves. The Gleason sisters left early in the morning for Miami. Delaney took off for Sarasota with some of his friends. Corsie Ral went to Lakeland to visit her folks. The transients were at a standstill. "Relax and enjoy it," said Cass. "After New Year's comes the deluge."

It was damp in the lobby. Cass got on her knees to build up a fire, and I spread myself on the davenport with the Sunday papers. The doorbell rang, making me jump. People generally just walked in. I leaned forward to see.

"It's a soldier," I said.

"Oh, no!" protested Cass. Her joints creaked as she stood up, and she made a face at me.

The soldier stood waiting outside the screen door while Cass looked him over in that hostile way she had when

someone was after a room. He was tall and rather gangly. He said, casually, "Lady, it's like this. The big hotels are full of bars and boys in brown. I thought it might be a nice gesture to get away from it all."

Cass said, pleasantly, so I knew she was won, "When are you due back at base, Sergeant?"

"Tuesday morning, ma'am." The soldier had a very slight drawl.

"I guess I can fix you up that long." Cass frowned. "What state are you from?" She liked to place people by their accents, and I think it provoked her when she found herself stumped.

He came to attention and laid his cap over his heart. "Beautiful Colorado," he said, looking amused. "Vacationland of America!"

"Will you listen to that, Nadine!" Cass exclaimed, pushing open the screen. "A traitor in Champion City!"

The soldier stepped into the lobby. He hadn't noticed me sitting there and he looked surprised. He stared in the most peculiar way. He had hazel eyes and a humorous, rather boyish face with a slight droop to his lower lip. His hair was mouse-colored and might have been curly if it hadn't been so short. He said then, nodding his head sagely, "She's just an apparition, of course! It's that mirage I used to see in old New Guinea. A dream girl with big brown eyes."

I felt embarrassed when Cass introduced him. I thought I was too old to have a young boy look at me like that. His name, he said, was Randall Peters. Cass registered him and gave him her best front room with a view.

Since the wind had stopped, I went up to try the roof-deck. I loved the sun. Cass said it made her feel blasted. But in the bright glare and shimmering heat all my doubts and griefs, like my body, lay quiescent, baking. From the roof I could see the bay, bluer than the sky. Down below, I spied the sergeant. He crossed the road and disappeared into the park. From time to time as I opened sleepy eyes, I caught glimpses of him exploring paths where the trees were thin.

When I was helping Cass get supper, I sneaked out on the back stoop for another look at the incredible weather, the first really warm day since I'd been in Florida. I couldn't resist walking once more around the patio. On a tree back near Corsie Ral's cottage, oranges were streaked with gold. Poinsettias bloomed all along the lodge, and up by the terrace I found three kumquats on the little sick bush. Randall Peters came down the outside steps from the balcony and met me there.

"Well, well," he exclaimed pleasantly. "How nice to find you still here! Sometimes my illusions last only an hour."

I smiled, feeling feminine. "But I'm real! You can't get rid of me."

He said, "Ho! That's what they all say!"

He went next door to eat, and when Cass and I came into the lobby after doing dishes, he was sitting there reading. Cass asked him if he'd like a drink. He stood up with his thumb in his book. "Success," he said. "I planted myself where you'd fall over me and let my tongue hang out only a quarter of an inch. I didn't want to be too obvious."

Cass laughed. "What are you reading?"

"*I Love You. I Love You. I Love You,*" he said, looking at me over Cass's shoulder. "It's Bemelmans. He's all my war-torn nerves can stand."

"Stop eyeing Nadine like that, Sergeant!" Cass said. "Or I'll have to lock her back up in the cookie jar!"

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "It's the curse of New Guinea. When I see a pretty girl my eyes bug out of my head."

Cass went to fix us a drink, and I sat down. The soldier sank back in his chair and put aside his book. "The boys back from Europe run on about women there being a dime a dozen. It makes me want to paste them right across the mouth. Where I was, women weren't a commodity; they were a mirage. I was afraid I might never see one again. A fellow gets kind of starry-eyed and chivalrous after an ordeal like that."

I asked, "How long have you been back?"

"About three months."

"Do you like Florida?" I was just making conversation.

He said, "I couldn't give it any rave notices—up until now!" He narrowed his eyes. "No doubt you have a husband down here?" I shook my head. "Well!" he said, sitting up straight and rubbing his hands. "I'm liking Florida better all the time!"

Cass invited Randall to have Christmas dinner with us. She got up at four o'clock in the morning to put the turkey on. When I awoke I could smell it. About ten o'clock, when I was peeling avocado and oranges for salad, and Cass

had a pumpkin pie ready for the oven, Randall wandered into the kitchen. "Mm-mm!" he said, breathing deeply. "That divine North American bird!"

Cass said, "It's a peanut-fattened turkey. More tender than the grain-fed ones up north."

I had another upsurge of homesickness, memories of past Christmases pressing at my throat. I said disagreeably, "I'd rather have a grain-fed one up north."

Cass dusted floury hands on her apron. "Do me a favor, Ran. Get Nadine out of here! Take her for a walk or something."

She didn't fool me. I left in a stubborn mood. Ran said, when I met him a few minutes later on the terrace, "You won't need that sweater."

I said, "Oh, yes, I will, too."

We turned down the shore road. Ran said, "A white Christmas would be nice! I haven't seen snow in years." He gave a disgusted laugh. "When I came back to the States, I told them I didn't care where they sent me just so it wasn't south! I never wanted to see anything tropical or even lukewarm again. Some old Colonel gave me his word I'd be stationed practically in my home town. I left his office smelling the Rockies. So the next day I woke up on my way to Florida."

When we came to the quay, Ran and I climbed up to walk along the sea wall. The glitter of the water hurt my eyes. The sun broiled. There was no wind at all. I stopped and said, "I've got to take this sweater off. I think I'm going to die!" Ran waited with an amused expression while I peeled it. I glanced up at him. "If you make some insuf-

ferable masculine comment, I'm going to push you off in the water," I told him.

"I haven't said a word." He took the sweater from me.

"I'll carry it," I insisted.

"No, I like to be burdened with girls' things. It's good for my morale."

He walked on ahead of me along the sea wall. I looked him over from cap to heels. He was taller and thinner than Steve, agreeably flat-seated, but his shoulders and the contour of his neck and ears couldn't in my estimation compare. Why had I fussed at him, I wondered. Because I knew he was smitten with me and I wanted to be cute? I must be careful.

I said, "You don't seem very embittered by the war."

"No sense, no feeling!" Ran said. "Fact is, I got so I laugh at every grisly thing. That's a form of madness in itself. But at least it keeps a man rolling with the shocks, not against them." The sea wall widened and Ran dropped back to walk beside me. "What slays me is to hear the boys who haven't been across tell about the tough time they had setting up the camps! My, how they suffered!" Ran's face lit. "Had to clear a site of a little underbrush with bulldozers. Maybe a nasty swamp needed to be drained. Mosquitoes were terrible. Three weeks without a Coca-Cola machine!"

We came to the end of the sea wall. As Ran helped me down, holding me as though I were some precious fragile stuff, I made cool feminine appraisal of his touch. For someone who was not Steve, he was rather pleasing. We headed across the narrow peninsula toward the causeway.

Along the road palms lay upturned from the fall hurricanes. We stopped by the huge uprooted base of one of them, and dug shells out of the roots, and while we were standing there a jeep full of soldiers went past. "Lucky! Lucky! Lucky!" they called. Ran bowed after them, touching his cap.

"What did they mean?" I asked.

"I have a girl!" he said. "What else?"

Underneath his banter I sensed a seriousness that alarmed me. I dropped the shells and rubbed the sand from my hands. I said, "Don't look at me like that, Ran!" I thought, I will scotch this right away. "I'm too old for you. I'm almost thirty-two."

Ran knitted his eyebrows. "Vital statistics never impress me much," he said. "But if you're interested—I'm twenty-seven."

"You don't even look that old!"

"I am," he insisted. "I got born just as soon as I could after I heard you were here." His tone was just a little bit nasty. But I felt he was laughing at me too.

"Don't you have a girl, Ran? Back home or some place?" I asked as we walked up the incline leading to the causeway.

"No, I don't. Say——" he interrupted himself. "Look down there!" We looked over the side. Around the abutments in the damp sand were myriads of tiny crab holes. We went to examine them. Ran tossed my sweater over his shoulder, and crouched to dig out a crab. It scuttled, no bigger than my thumb nail. Ran looked up at me laugh-

ing. He poked a hole with his forefinger and put the crab back into it. But the crab popped out again. "Doesn't like them custom-made!" He stood up, smiling, wiping his hands on his handkerchief.

I thought, he's just a boy! Then I thought, still, all men do things like that. Steve would do the same thing. Only he wouldn't have brought me down here with him. He'd have left me standing, high and dry, where I'd be safe—alone! . . . *"I want to go, too!"* *"No, you wait. I'll be back in a minute."* And there was Steve going busily off somewhere, while I drew upon my long wife's pipe of patience, too snug to be annoyed. Could it possibly be true that this time he wasn't coming back! . . . Gooseflesh rose along my arms.

"Let's get in the sun," I said. "I'm cold."

The sun blazed on the causeway. A Negro was cleaning fish on the other side at the water's edge. Gulls and pelicans snatched at the waste and entrails, screaming and fighting. Ran leaned on his elbows at the railing, his chin in his hand, the curious boyish enchantment upon him.

"Come on," I said. "Come on!"

The causeway stretched, bleached and white, all the way to View Vista Island. "We'd better start back soon," Ran said, glancing at his watch. We walked out a little way and stood by the rail on the westward side, our backs to the sun. It was nice out there, away from everything, leaning on a bridge between the water and the sky. A puff of warm wind lifted my hair.

"I think it's very odd," I began again, "your not having a girl."

Ran laughed. "Okay, I'll tell all! I had a girl once. She was the kind that loves to snuggle in a chinchilla stole reeking of any old kind of perfume just so it costs sixty simoleons an ounce. I was studying journalism, and about the same time I met her I learned that a good newspaper man sometimes earns all of thirty-five dollars a week. So I promptly shunted into business administration and boned up on books like *How To Found a Dynasty on a Dollar a Day!*" Ran talked in a flippant manner, as though the affair were long past and unimportant anyway. "Then came the war! The dear little thing shrank the front of my new khaki blouse with her tears, sobbing how she'd be waiting and praying.

"Now comes the shift," Ran said, leaning on one elbow and waving his arm. "Our hero is next seen slogging through swamp-mud dodging cannon balls and insects as big as Newfoundland dogs. The mail comes roaring in with a letter from his lady!

"It was the same old story," he said, dropping his dramatics. "She wanted to be the first to tell me. She'd married a paltry chicken colonel whose father ran a squalid little short-loan business covering a network of forty-three states. I was right reckless there for a day or two. I was off to earn myself a medal—posthumous award. Then I got to thinking that anyone who would write such a fatuous letter about 'time healing all wounds' was well lost! So I draped my rabbit's foot and my Indian lucky piece back over my chest, dug the deepest goddamn fox hole of World War Two, and got into it."

I waited, smiling at him. "Is that all?"

"That's everything about me. Now——" He picked up my left hand and pointed to the ring. "Where's the man that goes with that?"

"I just wear it from habit," I said. "He left me."

Ran made an incredulous face. "He couldn't have been very smart, could he?"

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, angry already.

"Any man who'd let you go!"

I didn't answer. "Let's get back," I said, touching his wrist to stop him from saying anything else. "Dinner will be ready and Cass will be mad."

Cass and I got up late on Tuesday morning. The weather was still warm. We took our coffee out into the patio, sitting lazily in wide-armed wooden chairs.

"I never saw anyone pack away such a dinner as Randall Peters," Cass remarked. "No wonder he moaned and groaned all afternoon on the couch!"

"There's something about having a man at a meal—picks it up so! Why is that?"

"You're just a man's woman!" Cass said. "Me, I can suffer along without 'em."

"I wonder if Ran caught that early morning bus all right."

"Well, he took my alarm clock, so I imagine he did."

Just then Ran came ambling down the outside steps. We stared at him stupefied. "What in the world?" Cass said. "Did you oversleep?"

"No," he said indifferently. "Just decided not to go back. Maybe I'll stay here all week."

Cass said, "But what will they do to you?"

"I'll find out when I get there."

"But, Ran," I said, "won't they court-martial you or something?"

He smiled at me. "I've got a perfect record. I asked myself, am I a man or a tin soldier? Why should I walk out on a wonderful time and two such women to sit on my rear end in a goddamned camp?"

All day a lazy sense of intimacy existed among the three of us. We didn't do anything except loaf and eat Christmas leftovers and talk and drink a couple of Planter's Punches. A feeling of guilt hung over us, like playing hooky. We got out cards in the evening for a game of three-handed rummy. And that night, after we left Randall and closed the door into the apartment, I said to Cass, "You know! I've hardly thought of Steve all day!"

But on Wednesday the spell was broken. Delaney returned in the morning, and about noon the shell-maker ladies burst into the lobby, agog over their trip. Hobson Hawes came over in the afternoon and sat around. I seemed to be introducing Ran to one person after another. Cass began to gather tension over the expected onslaught of guests, and moved about restlessly. In the evening her steady boy friend, Stanley Braden, came to take her to dinner.

At nine o'clock Ran decided to catch his bus back to base. I walked a short way with him down the street. We stopped by an overgrown vacant lot. It was very dark. The palms rustled with a silky sound. I let Ran kiss me, though I could easily have kept him from it. I felt flushed,

but I'm not sure Ran himself was the cause. I think any personable male would have excited me, looking at me the way he had for four days, after my loneliness.

I gripped his arms and begged, "Please, please, Ran! *Don't like me!*"

He said, his face bent close to mine, "It's too late. I already do."

"No, no! You're much too nice. I'll only hurt you!"

He lifted his hand, brushing the hair gently from my temple and cheek and ear. "I'll be back," he whispered. "I'll be back."

LIEUTENANT FROM TAMPA:

Fortunes of War

YOU DON'T KNOW ME AND YOU MAY NEVER SEE ME AGAIN. I'm married. I've got a nice wife and two kids. I don't go out looking for anything, see? If something comes my way I don't pass it up either. What's the odds? You're a long time dead. Anyway I've got a hunch I'm going to be awfully happy about that little dish from the Kumquat May when I get to be an old man!

My wife and kids are stashed away up north with my folks, while I'm fighting the battle of Tampa. This war wasn't my idea and I'm just doing the best I can. I'm due for a transfer and I'm restless. Well, a couple of the Air Corps boys are driving down to Champion City to the beach and dance hall there for New Year's Eve and they ask me to go along. I think they kind of pity me because I'm older and I'm Signal Corps. That View Vista night club or whatever they call it is quite a spot. My boys glommed on to a couple of girls, which was fine. I made a date with them to pick me up at six o'clock the next morning at the bus station. I didn't notice anything that interested me

particularly, and I wasn't looking. I planted myself at the bar and listened to the music.

After the tumult and shouting at midnight, I'd seen enough of the dancing, and I moved out to the cocktail lounge. I crowded up to the bar right at the corner where I could turn and look over the tables. Well, roll my eyes for dice if I didn't spot a lovely dove over by the mural! She was sitting at a table in front of painted banana trees, birds and beasties, surrounded by live blobs, representing, I believe, the human race. They all seemed pretty gay. They were drinking—as who, pray, wasn't? The gal and I began to bandy glances back and forth, and all at once I realized it was getting sultry in there and the laundry had shrunk my collar.

Now I am a very relaxed fellow; I do not jump the gun. I'm standing there leaning on my elbow looking over the situation. When I was a kid I was a great fan for Wallace Reed, and I used to practice that raised-eyebrow act of his. The trick got to be involuntary, and I guess the minute I spied this girl the old eyebrow went up and stayed up. I wear a small mustache. In OCS of course they made me shave it off, but down here in God's little acre I let it grow back on. My hair, while not as long as I liked, had crept out a little—thanks to an understanding barber and a large standing bribe.

I'm just marking time when this gal extricates herself from the madding crowd and comes over to me just like I hoped she would. The GI whistle went up all along the line, and I could see what they meant. She had lots of shiny hair and beeg brown eyes. She looked like one of those lit-

tle soft kind—though sometimes they fool you the worst. She was well stacked and the glow was upon her. Bloom, they call it in show horses. You've seen them in the ring, those young ones when they're excited, with blood up and eyes rolling, ears erect, nostrils flared, in the rack-on, blooming like mad. Well, that was this kid. Brother! Was she ready! She had on a little black garment, fitting like a glove, and touched up here and there with a color they brought out during the war called Shocking—Shocking Pink. I notice stuff like that. I notice women's clothes. And on her it looked good—but good. She wasn't too drunk, just high enough so she cut the preliminaries pretty thin. . . .

You know, women are peculiar. My wife can go around looking like a battle ax, with a hard mouth, about as yielding as a frigate under full sail. She's a good joe, mind you, but she takes life hard. Then it comes over her, whatever it is. She flushes and in a trice she turns warm and soft. Her skin clears and her eyes shine. She fills the eye, she fills the arm. She gets like that sometimes after a hot bath. . . .

Well, this gal says right off in a husky soft voice, "Do you like my new lipstick?"

I said, "It matches the pink in your dress."

"Cass bought it for me. She said I was wearing absolutely the wrong color."

"Do tell."

"She said lipstick colors change like hats every season. Did you know that?"

"No. But I'm intrigued."

"You're funny," she said, looking me over with those enormous eyes. "You have a mustache. You're older. And you're not Air Corps! I didn't know there was anything like you in the whole state of Florida."

"I got derailed."

"For a minute I thought you looked like my husband," she said. "But of course he never wore a mustache."

"Zat so? I trust he's not hovering about with a long sharp knife?"

"Oh no. He's up north."

"Good place for him," I said and changed the subject quick. She had taken on a sad look and I didn't want anyone in her condition pining for the home pastures. "Have you been having a veddy meddy happy New Year?"

"We've been drinking Manhattans."

"That'll do it," I said.

"We couldn't get Scotch! I never drank much of anything—— But Scotch was always what I never drank very much of!" She giggled. "Come meet my friends," she said. "They'll like you."

"Do we have to?"

"Sure!" She took my hand and tucked it cozily under her arm . . . soft and warm. That's the kind of thing that makes a fellow nervous. "We're all going back to the Kumquat May."

"The what?"

"That's where I live!"

"How silly of me——"

Don't ask me who the people were. Inmates from some tourist house. There was one big blonde babe I might have

given a second look—she had a wise eye, that one—but I was well preoccupied and content with my own little wren. Eventually we all piled into a station wagon.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Do you care?"

"No. I'm sticking to you, come what may."

"That's it!" she said.

"That's what?"

"The place I live!"

"Oh . . ." I didn't get the routine at all.

Just as we were leaving, the blonde babe said to my little gal, "You know what you're doing, chicken?"

Chicken said, "Oh yes!"

"Well, if you change your mind, call for Aunt Cassie!"

But I knew and Chicken knew and Aunt Cassie knew that it was as good as in the bag by then.

The caravan landed at a tourist hotel and went stampeding into the lobby. But Chicken pulled me back. "Let's go for a walk in the park," she said. It was about two-three A.M., I suppose, as dark as Egypt, but sure enough across the road there were trees and a path leading down to the water, with benches strung along in secluded spots. Just what you always wanted. We picked us a bench and we sank into it in loving embrace like any right-minded guy and his girl. Damn! I'll bet we hadn't been there three minutes when Chicken began to shiver. "I'm cold," she said, her teeth clattering. What the hell, chivalrous thoughts like draping her in my jacket flashed into my mind, and then I became aware of a black miasmic damp creeping up on me. I looked up into the sky. One or two pale stars

glimmered icily. The place was about as cozy as a witches' grotto. I put my hand down on the bench and lo! I laid it wrist-deep in an icy pool.

"Oh, Lieutenant," chattered my poor little Chicken, "I don't know what makes me so cold."

"I do," I announced. "We're sitting in two inches of ice water!"

Florida! Bah!

The DEW had fallen.

We stood up on the double. Chicken said, "Look at my dress!" It was that rayon stuff and had shrunk up in the back, showing about three inches of slip. She clung to me weakly, giggling.

This would never do. "Darling," I said. "My beautiful darling. Don't you have a bed? A nice warm dry bed, and won't you invite me into it? My trousers are wet and I am frozen."

She stiffened. "Oh, I couldn't!"

"Why not? Comfort is a wonderful thing."

"What would people say?"

"People won't know. Besides, they're too drunk to care."

We didn't just walk into the hotel and then stage a graceful fade-out. Oh no! This little chicken was made of sterner stuff. We did a Mack Sennett entrance through shrubbery and a back window. I tore my pinks and Chicken got an evil scratch on her arm. And then—oh, happy happy New Year's day! I found myself in the nicest warmest coziest bed since the opening gun of the battle of Tampa.

The fortunes of war, boys! None but the brave deserves the fair.

CASSANDRA: *Amok 1945*

WELL, I HAD A MIGHTY SICK CHICK ON MY HANDS New Year's morning. The prime requisite of a good landlady is the ability to stick to the hotel business and let her guests mind their own. But when Nadine still wasn't up by noon, I couldn't stand it any longer. She'd been a poor drinker when she first came to Florida, high on a few cocktails and sick as a pup the next day. I fixed a tray of tomato juice, scrambled eggs, tea, and toast, and tapped discreetly on her door. Nothing issued forth but a small moan.

"Open up," I said, "or I'll get the master key."

She let me in then and scrambled back into bed, sitting cross-legged in the middle with a blanket pulled around her shoulders. Her face was chafed. Her hair was a mop. The bed looked as though it had been stirred with a spoon.

"Oh, Cass!" she wailed. "Oh, Cass!"

"Eat some breakfast," I said. "You'll feel better."

"Oh no. I couldn't."

"Settle your stomach."

"No. I want to die!"

"Sorry, that's out. Nothing clutters up the place like a corpse. Here, drink this tomato juice."

"Oh, Cass, how can you be so nice to me when I'm so awful!"

"Nuts! Drink this before I pour it over your head."

Nadine drank the tomato juice. "I was thirsty," she said. "Oh dear!" she flopped back on her pillows and began to cry.

I said, "Tell mama."

"I don't know what makes me do such awful things! I used to look down on girls who acted like I'm doing now. I thought they were just tramps. I didn't know it was so easy to be bad!"

"Bad?" I questioned.

She said, "When I lived with Steve, I just didn't know what it was to feel the way I do now. I can't seem to control myself at all. It's driving me mad!" Another paroxysm of weeping shook her and she doubled her fists and beat at the mattress. "It's beastly! It's beastly!" I handed her a cleansing tissue from my pocket and she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose.

"I don't even know whether that man last night wanted me," she squeaked. "I just threw myself at him!"

"My, the poor fellow," I said. "Men hate that sort of thing."

But no sarcasm was going to help this kid. I sat on the edge of the bed beside her. "Look. You're human, aren't you? You're woman, aren't you? There's two strikes against you to begin with. Now don't top the deal off with a lot of self-reproach. You've stubbed your toe—well, okay! Don't make it a tragedy."

"But I want to be good, don't you see! I don't want to be

so cheap—so—cheap! It's not the first time, either. It's happened twice before since Steve went away. Twice! Once a married man at home. I never even liked him. People were giving me a party to cheer me up and I just went berserk. I went off with this man to a garage—in a car! It was horrible. Think of it, a man I loathed! And then once in a hotel I picked up a brassy salesman! Wasn't that awful? And I didn't even like him either. He was horrid. How could anyone do such things?"

"You're caught in a cycle, my friend. Just like the rest of us. It's all part of the good clean fun of being a woman."

"It isn't as though it did anything for me! Those dreadful men. It just disgusts me. It's not at all like Steve. Even that man last night—he seemed like a nice enough fellow, didn't he? And yet I never want to see him again. Never, never, never!"

"Come on," I coaxed. "Eat some breakfast." I actually did get some tea down her and a bite of toast and egg.

"Once on Steve's vacation," Nadine said, sitting cross-legged again with her blanket, "we went out on a farm. We'd never been to a farm before and we thought it would be fun. One day a heifer was in heat and the farmer brought a bull to breed her—to settle her, I guess they call it. And Steve and I watched. I felt sorry for her, poor thing. She was back in the grove with the milk cows and she was bawling and acting goofy, as though she didn't know what was the matter with her. The farmer couldn't get the herd away from her, and he just turned the bull in and left him all day. And she didn't seem to have a nice time at all!

Cows get all mixed up when one of them is in heat. They don't seem to know which they are, male or female, all riding each other and trying to ride her, and the bull had to keep driving them off. That night when they brought the heifer up she looked so pooed out and bewildered and sad. I said to Steve I was glad I wasn't a heifer, and he said he was glad I wasn't a heifer too." Here Nadine began to cry again. "But now! Now I know just how that poor heifer felt!"

I began to laugh. I couldn't help it. "Nadine," I said, "you're just a nice normal human being having a bad time! Why don't you take the advice of an old crone? Pick yourself out some clean decent young man and use him."

Nadine shook her head in shocked protest.

"I mean it," I insisted. "It's the only way you can keep from making a fool of yourself. You've seen what I've done in a like dilemma. I've cleaved unto one Stanley Braden, wealthy realtor, fusty bachelor, and stuffed shirt par excellence. I wouldn't think of marrying him. But he's not repulsive to me and he serves the purpose."

"You sound so cold-blooded, Cass!"

"You're so right. Stanley is a pill, let's face it. But he's better than being on the town. He takes me to dinner twice a week. He's strictly sub-rosa. Never admits even to himself that our relationship is illicit."

"But why don't you marry him?"

"Good heaven, child! Don't be naive. I couldn't stand him underfoot. I regard him simply as a public utility."

Nadine began to laugh and I knew the battle was won. She cried, "You make him sound so awful!"

"He is! But one must pay for services rendered, if only in boredom."

Nadine's tear-reddened eyes were shining. "Cass, you're wonderful."

" 'Sensible' is the word. Now if I were your age you know who I'd pick for my number one boy?"

"Who?"

"You know very well—Randall Peters!"

"But I don't love him, Cass!"

"Who said anything about love? I'm just talking about keeping your nose clean. He's a decent, clever boy. Someone to make you laugh—that's better than gold!"

"But he's too young for me."

"Nonsense. This is war, girl! Take what this rich land offers and be grateful."

Cassandra Bickham

CASSANDRA: *A Day in the Life of an Innkeeper*

IN JANUARY I TOOK A LONG PULL ON MY WILL POWER one morning and got up at six o'clock. I'd been running steadily behind in the work. My ad was in all the papers, but still no maid. I thought I'd have two quiet hours to do some bookkeeping before the guests began to swarm. The coffee had hardly made its first feeble perk before I heard someone fumbling at my living-room door.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" I muttered, going in and turning back the lock.

A haunt drooped on my threshold, clutching toothbrush and electric razor, with puffy face, wild hair, and a loud beachrobe draped haphazardly over wrinkled pajamas. It was Delaney, in his usual bright morning guise. He stumbled past me without speaking.

"What do you think you're doing?" I snapped.

He came to a weaving stop and peeped at me from sleep-swollen lids. "Flugleman!" he whispered hoarsely. "My God!" He tottered on into the bathroom and closed the door.

I knew what he meant. Mrs. Flugleman occupied the back room opposite Delaney. They shared the hall bath. She was a widow who spent her life rotating among season resorts, descending upon us right after the holidays. A dumpy woman, with soft, soft flesh running together into a flabby mound of breast, belly, and fat thigh, she dearly loved to squash her infirmities into a bathing suit and parade upon the beach. The sun left her brindle-haired and watery-eyed, with her burn fading promptly into tan and yellow patches. She was dirty. Poor Delaney's sensitive soul was daily scourged by the spectacle of an old gray corselet flung into the tub, a sour bathing suit over the shower rod, a woman's uncleaned razor lying on the bowl, drifts of sand gritting underfoot.

I spread my ledger before me on the kitchen table. About seven-thirty Nadine got up and moused around fixing her own breakfast, and shortly afterward Corsie Ral on her way to work came in by the kitchen door. Corsie looked wan and sick. She hadn't heard from her husband since before Christmas.

"If I get a letter today," she asked, "will you call me at the office?"

"I'll telephone you either way," I said.

Corsie perched on the kitchen stool for a moment. "I feel so bad," she said in her sweet voice, "just making up my bed. The sheets are so fresh and unwrinkled, hardly slept in at all. When my big old husband was here, the bed was always crumpled and pulled apart. He insists on loose covers, and he rolls and tosses and leaves hardly any room for me at all. He's hairy and he sheds!" She laughed,

thinking of it. "Every morning I brushed all those little old hairs off the sheet! Can you imagine that?"

Corsie went on out through the lobby, and Nadine, who was eating an egg off the counter rather than disturb my papers, commented, "I don't see how Corsie can talk about such intimate things!"

"She's dying of lovesickness." I stood up and stretched. I had to get started on my round of room-cleaning. "I think it relieves her to tell something personal about her husband. It brings him back for a moment."

I came out of the apartment just in time to hear Delaney, wide awake and behind the counter now, addressing Corsie in a loud, phony accent. "Hi, honey chile! When you-all goin' to come out of your li'l ole shell and let li'l ole me buy you a mint julep!"

She went out the door without answering. I turned on him in perfect fury. I think I'd have fired him if help hadn't been so scarce.

"Let her alone!" I said. "If some girl were waiting for you to come back from the war dead or alive, you wouldn't find it so funny!"

For a kid who could dish it out, Delaney certainly couldn't take it. His sensitive face dropped, not so much I suspect from the bawling out, as over the dig at his civilian status. He was extremely touchy about his 4-F rating, and ordinarily I watched what I said to him. He feigned indifference to all mention of the war, but he overplayed the act. Even when the rest of us were wild with anxiety, snatching at newspapers and hanging on broadcasts, Delaney pursued his little affairs with deaf ears.

I went on upstairs to my chores. I had the cleaning ritual down to a science, thanking my stars that the dirt was of light southern variety instead of northern smog. As always, the Gleasons' room constituted a blessing, the beds already made, and even with tables of shell-making paraphernalia, everything picked up and in place. Delaney's room was a nest. Originally I'd tried to make him clean it himself, but I'd given up on that. I felt furious that Number Six wasn't up yet—which meant I'd have to backtrack, and I longed to smite Number Ten for moving the waste basket. I counted fourteen extra steps off my efficiency rating. Now see here, I reminded myself. Let's not go into a tizzy! Save it for Flugleman's room.

Every day Mrs. Flugleman left some happy surprise for me. I drew a long breath, unlocked her door, and was duly touched by sight of white shoes drying on the bed, with abandoned splashings of chalk cleaner on rug and coverlet. I steeled myself and went into the bath. Poor Delaney! No wonder he fled at dawn's early light! A greasy scum of underwear soaked in the washbowl, with fresh dunes of sand drifting across the shower stall. What in the name of God did she do—bring it in with buckets?

I went looking for her. There was a time, during my initiation into landladyhood, when I left timid notes pinned about: Do Not Hang Wet Towels on Chairs, Do Not Throw Orange Peels in Toilets, and so on. This of course only supplied guests with ideas for sabotage they might not have concocted otherwise. Nothing, I found, took the unpleasant place of a heart-to-heart talk, and no day was now complete without my brush with Flugleman.

The dear soul—with her versatile ways of keeping her nose trained on other people's affairs—was a great lobby sitter. She was ensconced with newspapers, knitting bag, and stationery kit, filling in a crossword puzzle with a great flurry of pencil, when she looked up and saw me coming. She reared to the edge of the chair, batted her eyes rapidly, and bleated, "It's ten-thirty! And wheah is the mail?" I glanced around. No one was there except Delaney. Ignoring her complaint, I reminded her that the hall bathroom was a public domain, and would she please remove her personal effects at once.

She gave a toss of her head as she stamped off up the stairs. "Service is outrageous heah! Had I known, I would never have come! No mail delivery . . . not even a maid . . ."

I winked at Delaney and he leered back happily, evidently forgiving me for jumping him. "Wouldn't it be swell if Flugleman would get sore and leave?" he said.

"She won't!" I replied. "Her kind never give up until they wreck every stick in the place."

I went on into the apartment. Nadine was pressing a dress, the ironing board set up in her room. I stood in her doorway. "Flugleman's ranting for the mail again. I guess I'll just let her stew until after lunch."

Nadine looked up quickly. "But what about Corsie?"

"Oh, gosh!" I said. "I forgot." I slipped on a trench coat and prayed I wouldn't run into anybody I knew. It took me about twenty minutes to drive to the post office and back. When I returned, I came through the lobby and tossed the hotel mail to Delaney. In the apartment, I went into my

room and called Corsie on my private telephone. "Sorry, honey," I said. "No letter." She answered briskly, speaking from her public office. "Okay. Thank you, Cass." I hung up the receiver and sat back a moment looking at the phone. Now Corsie would return to her desk, sit there a moment, dread rising in her lungs. She would draw a long breath. . . .

I drew breath too. I looked at my watch. Well, better finish the cleaning. Some of Delaney's gang were already gathering on the terrace. I could hear their shrill laughter. It was Delaney's afternoon off and I'd promised him he could drive the station wagon to the beach. Lucy, Delaney's new girl friend, had been in the lobby when I came in with the mail. She was forever hanging around in saddle shoes—a plump youngster, eighteen or nineteen, with an acne condition of skin. She stayed at Singleton's, a cheap rooming house over on Mayapple Street. Delaney had fallen in with a group of young people who lived there, mostly students enrolled for the season at Champion City's Little Theater. I'm sure Delaney only tolerated Lucy because she was such a good audience. She watched his every move with admiration and laughed helplessly at his wisecracks.

I threw a salad together for lunch. Nadine came in from the service yard where she'd hung out her washing. "Flugleman's there putting up her underwear," she said. "She's real mad. She called you a war profiteer, said you got big prices with no service. She asked me just what your relationship was with that Mr. Braden!"

I laughed. "I've seen the old harpy ogling Stanley. Ever

notice how she fawns over men! Her insults are only for women. God, I hate a female who runs down her own sex."

I looked at Nadine while we were eating. She'd been much too subdued since New Year's. "Why don't you go to the beach with the kids?" I suggested. She wrinkled up her nose in distaste. "I wish you'd go out more," I said. "You can't devote your whole life to getting a suntan."

"I'm having a good time," she insisted.

"Well, all right. But why doesn't Randall Peters show up? How long has it been anyway?"

"Over three weeks. I wonder what they did to him."

"I thought he'd call before now."

"Maybe he changed his mind."

"He'll be here," I said. I pointed a finger at her. "And when he comes, you latch on to him! Champion City is not without competition."

I went on the desk. Delaney, with thin shanks sticking out pitifully below his striped woolly robe, left with his gang. The lobby seemed wondrously quiet and deserted. Even Mrs. Flugleman was gone, scuttling no doubt to the bus with her bathing suit under her dress. I could finish my book work. But oh no, who was that fumbling around on the terrace? My other favorite! The rotund pink-pated little dipso from Number Five cottage. He didn't hang around the lodge much, and I must say I bore up under this privation very well. He bounded through the screen door with his hat in his hand waving a newspaper.

"I want you to see something," he said, poking his shiny head across the counter, accompanied by a gale of sour

beery breath. He thrust the paper under my nose, folded back to the "Voice of the People" column. "That's my letter there," he said, pointing proudly. "Go ahead, read it!"

I didn't have my glasses. I held the paper at arm's length. " 'Your editorial on EDUCATION,' " I read, " 'was a good one and you are to be PRAISED for it. Nevertheless what the YOUNG PEOPLE OF TODAY need is not only EDUCATION but RELIGION. . . .' " I let my mind go blank staring awhile at the print. I knew the old sot had an evangelical streak. He hung around the bars collaring GI's and buying them drinks, just as long as they would hold still for his rantings. He was addicted to boiler-makers, dropping whiskey, shot glass and all, into beer with a great air of consecration. I understood he had quite a following, especially just before the end of the month.

I handed back his paper. "That's pretty strong stuff, Mr. Hovey!"

"I've plenty of copies," he said. He slapped the counter with his pudgy hand. "Keep it right here and let everyone read it!"

He turned and would have darted out, but I called him. "Mr. Hovey!" He stopped halfway to the door. "You've overlooked your rent again."

He frowned. "Rent?" he said, as though the word were quite new to him. His popped eyes shifted this way and that. He felt absently at his pockets. "I've been so busy——"

"One hundred dollars, please," I cut in.

He produced a moldy billfold, manipulating it lovingly

before he unsnapped the tab. It was crammed with lettuce. I counted the money carefully before I gave him a receipt. The Gleason sisters were coming down the stairs, heralded as usual by muffled giggles. Mr. Hovey fled.

The two women stood in front of me expectantly. "Do you notice anything?" cried Ernesta. They were wearing serviceable rump-sprung suits. On their left lapels hung monstrous wishbones studded with multicolored shells.

"My!" I said, groping for words. "You are progressing!"

"It was Dot's idea," Ernesta admitted. "They're capon bones! We got them from the Lyric Cafeteria."

Dot said, her massive face aglow, "When we asked for wishbones, I don't know whatever they thought!"

"We start on scenics next," Ernesta bubbled. "The very first one we make is going to be for you!"

"Oh, Ernesta!" Dot turned upon her sister reproachfully. "We meant to surprise her!"

"Scenics?" I said blankly, suspecting the worst.

"Those dear little scenes made from shells," Ernesta said. "We take a mirror for a lake and cement in flowers and trees——"

Good Lord, I thought. It might even be wired for a lamp! I said feebly, "I'm terribly flattered."

The sisters beamed upon me. "Pretend I didn't tell you!" Ernesta said.

"I'll be surprised!" I promised.

They went in a flurry out the door, stopping to wave and smile back over their shoulders—as though taking off on a world cruise, instead of a run downtown to the dime store and a soda at Walgreen's.

Nadine stayed behind the counter while I left to pick up the afternoon mail. I thought I'd have to take the bus since Delaney was using my car, but I saw Hobson Hawes next door and he let me take his. I crossed the street from the Post Office to the A & P to do some marketing, stopping first to telephone from the pay booth.

"No letter, Corsie."

There was a long pause. Her voice came softly, "Okay, Cass . . ."

I had myself settled back at the desk, with my glasses on, starting to post from journal to ledger when Delaney and Lucy came back from the beach. They had dropped off their friends at Singleton's. Their faces were red and parched by sun and wind. They hooked their elbows on the counter.

"Guess what!" Delaney said.

Lucy began, "Hobson Hawes told us to use his cabana——" Delaney interposed, "Damned decent of him!" —"so we didn't have to rent a windbreaker of anything. And there we were with our whole crowd, drinking cokes and having fun——"

Delaney took it away. "And up comes Frankenstein's latest creation: Mrs. Flugleman!"

Back flopped Lucy's head as she ha-ha-ed. Everything Delaney said slew her. She went into an imitation, plunking ludricously across the room with her big feet. " 'Oh, theah you are! Well, if you young people don't mind I'll just join you!' "

"She infiltrated," said Delaney. "We laid down a volley of insults. But she was impervious."

Lucy surrendered to another paroxysm. "So then," she said, her voice quaking, "when we were leaving, Delaney just said, 'Ta, ta!' and drove off and left her to come on the bus!"

"Hallo, everyone!" Mrs. Flugleman blew jauntily through the doorway from the terrace. "We meet again!"

Lucy clapped her hand over her mouth and Delaney stared dumfounded. "Sure do," he muttered. "We're in a rut."

Flugleman laughed mirthlessly, as she shook the stairs with her determined tread—in a hurry, I guess, to jettison her sand. Who knew, maybe she carried it packed away in her bloomers.

Delaney was almost beside himself. "Nothing human could get here that fast! She rides the sirocco! She's Evil Conscience! She's Mrs. Coffee Nerves!"

Poor Lucy collapsed shrieking into a chair.

Delaney went to dress. But Flugleman was back before him in unbelievable minutes, ready to take up her watch in the lobby. "The wattah was wonderful!" she exclaimed, settling herself near the entrance.

I looked at her doubtfully. "You don't mean you went in!" No one but hardened army swimmers tackled the Gulf this time of year.

"Indeed I always have a good splashing! So refreshing! Afterward I joined the youngsters. My, what a giddy set—quite boresome really. I wonder where Hobson Hawes was! Quite often he's theah!"

I didn't dare look at Lucy. She had casually buttoned a skirt over her shorts, pulled a fuzzy sweater over her head,

and now sat back against the wall waiting for Delaney. They were having dinner together at the Paradise. Dutch, of course, or maybe on Lucy, since Delaney was always broke. They would have to bolt their food. Delaney was due back on the desk at six o'clock.

Corsie stopped in on her way home from work. She knew it was useless, but hope drew her. Maybe, by rarest chance, I had made a mistake. Her eyes went from me to her empty box and back again. I gave a negative shake of my head. She turned slowly and started out.

"Good evening, Corsie Ral!" Mrs. Flugleman said. "Aren't you going to speak!"

"Oh, good evening," said Corsie, looking up and adding politely, "Cool, isn't it?"

"Cool! It's just right! You native Floridians have such thin blood!"

But Corsie was already stepping off the terrace, headed fast, fast for her cottage, the dark dread ready to burst its shutters now that day was done. . . . I pulled my thoughts back from her reluctantly to face the two women who were just coming through the door.

"What's got into that gal?" said the sun-blackened tiny one. She was Raydella Rose Maygrew, who rented the Number Two cottage next to Corsie's. "We passed her and she didn't even look at us."

"I think she's stuck up," said the other, a much younger blonde girl, named Violet Renn. She was the new tenant in Number Three.

Flugleman piped in. "You must remembah Corsie's a Florida girl. The natives don't think much of us wintah visi-

tors, even though we're their livelihood! It's like that everywheah. Local people are always so provincial."

Raydella Rose, at the counter, stretching her thin neck to peer toward her box, growled through closed teeth, "Why-can't-that-woman-keep-her-trap-shut!"

I said briefly to the two girls, "Corsie's worried about her husband. His last letters were from Belgium."

The eyes of Raydella Rose rolled white in her blackened face. "Migawd!" she whispered. "In the Bulge?"

"Very probably. She's not heard from him since."

"Gee," said Violet. "Can't we do something for her?"

I shook my head. "Just let her alone."

"Where are you girls going for dinnah?" bleated Flugleman, frowning as though vexed she couldn't overhear us.

Raydella Rose said indifferently, "Not the Lyric! Migawd, they've got reprocessed butter!" She made a gagging face.

Mrs. Flugleman took up cudgels. "The Lyric has lovely food! Only lahst night I had the nicest little joint of lamb with mint sauce and an excellent stuffing! I surely can't complain about the buttah. You girls seem to forget there's a waah on!"

CASSANDRA: *Raydella Rose Maygrew and the Old Grad*

NADINE AND I WERE LATE FINISHING OUR DINNER DISHES. "It's been a long day since six A. M.," I sighed. "I'm certainly glad Delaney's on the desk tonight."

"*Psst!*" came from the back porch. "May we come in?" It was Raydella Rose, with Violet Renn still in tow. I had kept my door into the lobby closed and locked since the Flugleman menace hit us. I was afraid at first that Raydella Rose might prove a nuisance in her own right, but say, that gal led a life of her own. Namely men! I swear I don't know where she found them. I never knew what she'd turn up with next. She liked to stop by and exchange the time of day with me and I let her because I thought her uninhibited patter might be good for Nadine—show her how the unprotected half lived.

The girls prepared to plant themselves in the kitchen. I waved them on into the living room. "Be comfortable," I said, thinking of my own weary bones. "Probably Flugleman has her ear latched at the keyhole. But along with our big Florida roaches, we just have to accept her."

We all sat down, performing the tribal ritual of taking cigarettes and lighting up. Even Nadine, who had just recently started smoking, pushed the ottoman against the wall and sat like an odalisque puffing away. Raydella Rose flopped limber as a rag doll in the biggest chair. She had on fancy platform shoes with big bows. "I couldn't dig up a date tonight," she jabbered, little raisin-colored eyes glistening in her scorched face, her speech very rapid and slurred. "Though after my last one, I should complain! Broke my own record for an all-time new low!" She interrupted herself, "Hey, Violet! Are you going to get yourself a job?"

Violet looked surprised. "Why, no," she said. "Are you?"

"I got one already! Best way I know to case a town for men."

Violet said, "I'm on vacation." She spoke carefully, with preoccupied eyes. "Daddy promised me a trip to Europe after I finished college. But with the war and all, I had to come down here instead."

I thought to myself, Well, Daddy couldn't be too well-heeled or she'd be staying over at Sea 'n' Shore or Pebble Beach Gables. She sat properly in her chair, showing to advantage under the floor lamp, and I, with my old bleached upsweep, sighed with envy over the girl's really beautiful honey-blonde hair. Raydella Rose's thin legs were thrust out any old way with one foot turned over on the ankle; but Violet's shapely ones were crossed effectively just above the knee.

Raydella Rose said, "You can hang around the beach. But at my age, I look better with my clothes on."

Violet said, "I haven't seen any cute men yet. Have you?"

Raydella Rose gave a flip of her hand. "The town's crawling with them! But I don't know how cute. Oh, brother, the creep I was with last night! Of course I have to pick off flotsam and jetsam. You and Nadine can choose from the whole U.S. Air Force. Those birds have twenty-twenty vision! It's gotta be awful dark or they gotta be awful drunk before giving me a tumble!"

Nadine looked at me, amused, and I laughed, but Violet seemed annoyed. She examined the tip of her cigarette, frowning. "Well, if I can't meet somebody cute, I don't even want to bother."

"You don't!" squealed Raydella Rose. "A gal can get awfully moldy that way. I just close my eyes and grab."

"But that's so sort of degrading, isn't it? I don't like to be just another girl to the men I date. I want to be special." She appealed to Nadine. "Don't you think a girl ought to be terribly discriminating?"

Nadine demurred. "I don't know. I don't go out very much."

"Well, neither do I, really," Violet hedged. "Except for boys I knew in college. But on vacation a girl is bound to meet new men, and if she likes them and they're crazy about her, well, it can all be sort of gay!"

Raydella Rose made a face at me across the room. "They're waiting for Romance. Boy, oh boy, let me have the looks of either one of them for just a week! Would I have myself a time!" She whistled and kicked out a foot.

"Still," she said philosophically, "I could be worse off. I might have a puss like Flugleman's!"

Even Violet smiled at that. She said, "You know it's a funny thing, but I see that woman every place I go!"

"I'm getting quite fond of her," said Raydella Rose blithely. "With me, she shows up only at crucial moments. Say, for instance, there I am in a drugstore buying a contraceptive, or at a hotel registering with somebody else's husband! Swish! Right at my elbow pops dear old Flugie!" Violet blinked, and Nadine goggled in utter astonishment. But Raydella Rose never stopped for breath. "That reminds me. I wanna tell you about last night! You know in The Raven, how dark and smoky it is? Well, I tapped a guy on the shoulder who was sitting at the bar and said, 'Hey, you look like someone I used to know!' Just the innocent remark of an inebriate in passing. Never dreaming! And migawd, it *was* someone I used to know.

"He started right in reminiscing. I didn't have a chance —he glommed on to me just like an octopus. All that fascinating stuff about how he broke the record at the hurdles, and what a whiz he was at the turkey trot! He ordered drinks for old times' sake—and borrowed a buck from me to pay for them. That's how I knew for sure it was my old friend!"

"Was he a soldier?" I asked. I was enjoying the tale, half reclining on the couch with my feet up.

"Yes, amazing! Through the fumes I finally made out he had on the popular color of the year, and I shrieked, 'Don't tell me you're only a private at your age!' and he

said, 'Private first class I'll have you know, hahahahah!' He laughed after everything he said. Not that he was amused, he just wanted to show off his good teeth. He was remarkably well preserved! He looked so much like his old college self, I expected him at any minute to dribble a basket-ball across the floor and shoot a sure one from the foul line."

"An ex-athlete!" I groaned. "God forbid!"

"He was famous in his day!" Raydella Rose declared. "Not that he ever rated from a date angle. Wouldn't spend any money. He was one of those gents with four arms, like being caught in a windmill. The girls used to warn each other about him. Didn't even bother to buy a hamburger—just whizzed right out and parked in a borrowed car and shifted into that four-armed act. And a poor gal so weak from hunger she could hardly defend herself!" Raydella Rose had a way of drawing up her monkey face and laughing without making a sound. "That's how he earned a reputation for lady-killing. He starved them into submission!"

Raydella Rose was talking for my benefit. We'd left the younger girls far behind us now. Violet lighted a cigarette off her old one, crushing the butt with greatest concentration into the tray. Nadine abandoned her smoking. She sat back straight against the wall, staring solemnly at Raydella Rose.

"I'm glad I'm old!" I said, raising my arms in thanksgiving. "Never again do I have to fight off some adolescent necker!"

"Don't count on it," said Raydella Rose. "Wait'll I tell

you. My chum wasn't only well preserved, he was a case of arrested development! He wasn't interested in anything that had happened since 1919. I guess he thought America was still fighting World War One. His teeth fooled me at first—all that calcium! But pretty soon I noticed his hair. He had it parted over his left ear, draped item by item from left to right and carefully welded together. But when the stickum began to melt, there was pate aplenty. I couldn't help thinking how alluring he must be in the morning with that long displaced swatch dangling from his left ear across the pillow!

"I said to him in that frank way of mine, 'Migawd, the Army must have been desperate the day they took you!' Made him sore, because of course he thinks he's still Stuff! He told me my face reminded him of nothing so much as a withered prune, except that my brain couldn't possibly fill the pit. Always the gentleman and horse-collar, though, he insisted on walking me home. I refused to pay for a cab. And would you believe it! That old moth-eaten piece of taxidermy, if he didn't go into routine! Pulled a line on me I first heard when I was pedaling a tricycle! You know —finish neck and neck for old friendship's sake, think what I was missing, when I was an old woman I'd be sorry, and what was I saving it for?

"So then he got mean. He said, 'Don't you know virginity went out with the horse!' And I said, 'Isn't it a coincidence that I'm so old-fashioned and you're so repulsive!' That was Act Two. Then came Act Three. He launched into a long diatribe about the glorious day wherein women reverted to their true bovine state and didn't pretend to a

choice they were incapable of feeling, one way or another. I said, 'You're in the wrong uniform, bub! Where's your swastika?' He said, Wise up, sexual intercourse was now as taken for granted as the goodnight kiss. I said, 'I'm in favor of it—*only not with you!*' "

I'm sure I don't know what Nadine was thinking by now. Her eyes were enormous. But Violet was plainly distressed. What fantasy went on in her young blonde head, that she hated so to have disturbed? A squeeze of the hand, a taunting laugh, a teasing kiss or two, and a perfect little gentleman sighing on the front porch at midnight, "Please go in at once, dear lady! You don't know what you do to me!" . . . Hmmm . . . If any woman past puberty could harbor that illusion, the male of the species must have changed considerably since I was a girl.

"Where was all this going on?" I asked Raydella Rose.

She flipped her hand again. "But that's what I started to tell! We were on the terrace. Boiled as I was, I knew better than take him to my little cottage by the oleanders. And just as he went into Act Four—consisting of a direct tackle on the line of skirmish, who should crawl out of the drain pipe on her hundred legs but Flugleman! She simpered, 'Good evening, Raydella Rose Maygrew!' "

Both Nadine and Violet suddenly came to. "I'd have died!" said Violet.

"It was a godsend! I parted the gentleman's biceps and cried, 'Flugie, darling! How sweet of you to come. I want you to meet the muscle-man of 1910!' And with that, I tore inside, charged upstairs and hid in the broom closet."

Nadine and I puttered in the kitchen making ice water after the girls had gone.

"That Raydella Rose," Nadine said. "She's tough, isn't she?"

"That she is," I agreed.

"She must have been through a lot."

"Yes. But don't be feeling sorry for her. Get it out of your noggin that we women of doubtful virtue are wretched. We're not. When you've survived everything that can happen to you, you're apt to settle back and rub your hands with glee! Keep that in mind, when you think your life's over because you've lost Steve."

"But I wouldn't want to be like her!"

"Well, I don't suppose she set out for it either! Life shakes us. Violet is the one you should pity. She'll never be cherished as you were, and she's not punch-happy like Raydella Rose."

Nadine sat on the stool, drinking her glass of water. I filled the ice tray and put it back. She said, "I should think Violet could have anything she wants. She has looks and money and she's young."

"Yes, but you watch! There's something funny about her. She's cold and yet she's man-crazy. I get the impression she's been around, and yet she acts shocked. Good God! if Violet's been slugging it out with college boys for four years, she can't have much left to learn, can she?"

"I rather like her!"

I said, "Aw, I'm just jealous because of her hair."

Nadine got up and put her empty glass at the sink. "I

wonder what would have happened to me if Steve hadn't married me. I'd have been worse than anybody."

"If Steve hadn't married you someone else would."

Nadine delayed another minute. "I still don't see how you get over things," she said softly.

"It takes time," I said. "The past goes into backwash. I never think of the horrors that happened to me, unless something turns back the current." She was looking at me questioningly as though I were an oracle, so I repeated, "It takes time."

Nadine started to get undressed, but I had one more chore. I went into the lobby to brush up the fire and empty the ashtrays, closing up for the night. I walked out on the terrace and looked back at the corner cottage. All was dark.

Well, I must get to bed. I was exhausted. I came back in, put on the night light, and turned off lamps. I checked on the door, and glanced back again at Corsie's cottage. Yes, it was dark . . . too dark, somehow. I stood there for a few seconds, then turned resolutely and headed for my bedroom. Tomorrow was another day. I heard Nadine splashing away in the bathroom. I entered my room and started to unzip. I stood there with my placket half-way open, thinking . . .

Oh well, nuts! I grabbed up my car keys from the desk and went out the back way, through the service yard and across the patio. At Corsie's door, I stopped to listen. No sound . . . Should I? . . . I knocked. "Corsie," I called firmly. "It's Cass. Are you awake?"

Silence. Then slowly the door opened. Corsie's face

made a pale oval in the darkness. But I could see well enough. She was still dressed. "Yes?" she said dully.

"Get your coat," I said. "Let's take another run down to the post office. You never can tell about those army airmails."

Corsie scrambled, snapping the switch to the overhead light and making a dive for her closet. I stepped inside. I saw the wrinkled bedspread and the creases imprinted upon one side of Corsie's face. Over on the nightstand stood a large framed picture of a soldier, heavily jowled, wearing a big grin. I looked at the other end of the room. I let Corsie keep a grill and do her own cooking. It was all much too orderly.

"We'll stop at the Owl Car on the way back," I said. "That big guy might not like it very well if we let you starve to death."

CASSANDRA: *Backwash*

I WAS IN BED! OH, GLORIOUS! I STRETCHED MY ARMS AND legs to the four corners. Mine, all mine! I thought of wives across the world, huddled into sliver space, clashing at every move with the bony shanks of men, and I sighed. "Ah-h-h! Pity the spinster if you will! There is no bliss like being in bed alone!"

The lights were out. The sheet was pulled to my chin. I blissfully closed my eyes. Now to snooze . . . My back was aching unmercifully . . . What had I said to Nadine? I never remembered the past? Well, I didn't. Hardly ever. Mine was a cumulative series of errors. But it was like thinking of a stranger when I thought of myself. I couldn't remember any more what had motivated me. How could I have been always so positive and always so wrong? I suppose I thought love was a glowing ember or something.

My first husband was a handsome boy, very weak. I came to despise him. Then the second was a bluff salesman type —and a drunkard. I thought I could reform him, I guess. He took pride in such dull stuff as being able to drink twenty Martinis and still walk. He bored me right back into Superior Court.

I lived in Chicago. A third man came along, a polished over-fastidious man-about-town. He had some sharp delicate quality which threw me into a lather, like a monkey with a Manx cat. He never married me. His critical faculty brought out all my gaucheness. And I was so crazy for him, I think I nauseated him. Still he lasted some three years, taking me night-clubbing and week-ending. He called whenever he got good and ready, while I hovered over the phone trying to make it hatch. I despised myself for being a fool, but I couldn't seem to help myself. When at last he sloughed me off, I went into a near nervous breakdown.

That's a bad blow the first time a woman finds herself wanting a man who loathes her! I'm not sure the ego ever quite recovers. I came out of it, but my head hardened considerably in the process. No more of that glowing ember stuff. I was just about Nadine's age, and I'd say, at my peak in looks, tall, blonde, slender. I deliberately set out to marry for money. I got my hooks into an old Chicago family. As I recall I had every intention of being a good wife and playing fairly, but the pill I drew with the deal turned out to be more than I could stomach. It was all my own fault. We wound up as a front-page scandal, and I took him for a fat settlement.

And that was when this old mannequin cracked. It all got as feverish and out of hand as though I were dancing to strings. But there at the end, the mad incitement settled back within me; personal, vile. It snowballed right up with the previous affairs, so that I hadn't any self-respect left at all, or any trust in what I might do or be capable of doing. I ran away. I hid. Every day for months I walked on the

shore, looking at rocks and water. I went down to my bare bones. Finally, I came to accept myself again, take up the burden of being me, getting on with it. But I never returned to the scene of the crime.

I came here, bought this hotel, and started to run it. I thought this was the jumping-off place of the world. Kumquat May! I meant to change the name. It was a deliberate pun on the part of the former owners. But I couldn't seem to get rid of it. The trade likes it.

I got what I deserved, I guess. With me retribution always comes swiftly. My place was too small to afford proper service, and too big to handle by myself.

I was wide awake. The current had reversed itself and backwash lapped at my conscience. I turned and twisted and rolled. All the people of the day reappeared in chorus, volubly talking—"yak-yak-yak-yak-yak-yak-yak . . ." I pounded the pillows.

Those men I had married . . . I could scarcely recall the first two . . . Pretty boy, Hanley . . . drunkard, Tim. The pain was clearer than the men . . . Bruce, the wailing wall . . . Yes, he came back more sharply. Yet how devoid of worth for what he cost me! A minus zero of desire . . . Then Rodney! Poor odious Rodney . . .

They amounted to four years apiece, I figured out. In me, the cycle—begetting sorrow and forgetting it—fell into that small span. Four years to build myself up and let myself down! Sixteen years divided among four men, each leaving his deposit upon me, each taking some essence from me . . . Cassandra was a nude descending the stair-

case, changing and blending at every step, yet always the same figure. How many of me had there been?

Oh, those feathered after-midnight thoughts when the head lies restless in the pillow! . . . "I was just about your age, Nadine! Come to think of it, I had been cast off too. It hurt, didn't it? Badly bruised inside, result of some chance encounter with a two-legged male animal, ridiculously patched with hair."

Over on my stomach. Mercy, my bust is getting big! Back in the old man-hunting days when I was young and chafeless, I could have capitalized on these burgeoning breasts! Today they're only in the way, tumbling about under arm and slowing me up in the shower. . . . Rodney would have loved them! Duds always make much of externals.

Okay, over on your spine. Wallow in backwash! What was I like when I was thirty-two or thereabouts? Oh, pretty! The grossness and lard-lumps of middle-aged overeating had not yet begun to set in. No hard core within me worked outward to encase my face. My eyes were luminous, my lips inviting. I dyed my hair platinum. . . . I was a stenographer, very fancy, working in Chicago. It took three different jobs, remember? I hunted in Wacker Drive advertising, in Michigan Avenue oil, in La Salle Street financing. And there I trapped Rodney. Son of the rich, member of the Union League, reader of the Chicago *Tribune* and the *Journal of Commerce*: forty, stuffy, and sound as the dollar in 1936.

All the dictates of his formal upbringing, all the tongue-clackings of his North Shore mother, warned him against me—Cassandra, over-luscious, slightly bruised plum of un-

certain strain that tempted his hand. But Rodney was that particular type of gentleman who, when he reaches forty —facing the impending climacteric like a woman facing the menopause—turns ripe for the plucking. His senses quicken. He becomes desperate for all the good things he has missed.

And so he swept me off my feet in a whirlwind of recurring mad youth. He tossed his graying curls. He flashed expensive dental work. Masterfully, he overrode all my pretty protests. . . .

I made splendid beginnings at my role, retaining lightly my easy seat, until even his mother and I became polite friends. But one thing I had not figured on was hate. It crept into our souls. It poisoned every thought. I loathed him in the bedroom with his emasculated snuffle-then-snore of passion. He sensed my calculating scorn. He couldn't forget my questionable breeding and ill-kept prior marriages. I couldn't condone his sterile smug bachelorhood, the what-ho fishing cruises and impeccable good-fellow pursuits. All our days and nights resolved into one contest of spite. He was staid. He was proud. He would have lived his hateful life out with me rather than publicly admit the mistake. And that was how I got the best of him. I dragged him into court, pinned a scandal in his face.

Oh, Cassandra!

My lawyers won. I didn't. I planned to take the money and throw it in his face. I knew it would gratify him in the end to say he paid me off. But there at the wind-up of the trial, sitting befouled as a brass spittoon in old Cook County Building—a court's dummy, lawyer's pawn, news-

paper's puppet—I lost my hate. And there I saw, opposing me pale across the room, a man. Puny, given to bad dreams, afraid of falling . . . swathed in drab gray wool in smothering furnace heat . . . sneezing with a cold!

RANDALL: *Heavy Date*

SERGEANT PETERS," I SAID TO MYSELF. "YOU'VE GOT IT bad, old fellow." I had been thinking about Nadine Wildraven until it seemed to me that from the first moment I saw her I had thought of nothing else. For thirty days and thirty nights I thought about her. When I returned to the Kumquat May and walked up that path and up that step across the terrace into the lobby, my heart was seized with a wild fit of pounding. Silly, yes, but that's the way it was. Young Delaney sat behind the counter with his feet on the desk. I didn't much like Delaney. I couldn't find any common ground with him. My nerve failed me when I started to ask for Nadine, so I asked for Cass. But it was Nadine who came in first.

"Why, Randy Peters!" she exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

I don't recall anyone ever calling me "Randy" before. It seemed to issue from her spontaneously. My heart leaped into my throat and I had to get it back down before I could speak.

"Were you court-martialed?" she asked.

"Worse," I gulped. "Worse than that."

"Oh, Randy, what did they do?" she said, her face filled with concern.

Cass came running down the stairs, swathed in an apron, a cloth pinned over her head, drying her hands as she came. "Randall, my stout fellow!" she cried. "Where have they had you, Devil's Island?"

"My lips are sealed," I said.

"Come on, Nadine. Let's feed him! He'll talk."

Delaney watched this horseplay sourly, but as we went straight to the kitchen we were soon out of his range. Cass removed the mummy wrappings and emerged as I remembered her, silver-eyed and salty, well upholstered in ripe blonde um-mph. As for Nadine, I kept my eyes off her as much as possible. God pity a poor soldier, she was wearing shorts and some kind of snug striped blouse. I pretended to take her in my stride. I said hoarsely, leaning in the doorway, "Say, you look good with knees!"

She seated herself on a high kitchen stool. "I feel so naked!" She tugged to pull the shorts over her thighs—happily without much success.

Cass was digging away in the refrigerator. She came out waving in front of me a splendid black-market veal chop. "Now!" she said. "Where have you been?"

"Yes," Nadine begged with solemn eyes. "Tell us."

I am a weakling. I couldn't resist showing them my hands. The palms were covered with calluses and traces of great fat broken blisters. "Oh!" said Nadine. "How horrible!" And she came down from her stool and held my mitts and peered into them as though she were about to cry. Cass came flying again from the icebox. "How wicked!" she

said, her voice thick with indignation. She clenched a bunch of celery as though she meant to lay it over the C.O.'s head. "How dared they? To a soldier back from overseas?"

"It was nothing."

"What happened?" Nadine demanded. "I want to know."

"Well—" I took a chair and crossed my legs. "I duly reported to my unit commander. Incidentally, he's plenty tough on AWOLs. Has a reputation for——"

"Never mind that!" snapped Cass.

"It wasn't anything!" I said, dropping my act, my feelings wounded. Women always spoil a good story. "I did CQ duty for a week."

"What's that?" Nadine asked.

"Charge of quarters—counting noses on the boys in the barracks. Then, damn the luck, the squadron was sent out on field duty. I've been showing my green boys how to juggle packing cases and set up equipment. Funny how soft your hands get in a few months!"

God, aren't women inconsistent? There they were, worried and ready to weep over my broken body, and then just because I'm alive and well, with no blood shed, what happens?

"Was that all?" exclaimed Nadine disappointedly.

"What a dirty trick," Cass said, "leading us on!" and muttered in disgust, "CQ duty!"

That night I took Nadine to dinner. I invited Cass too, but she was going out with her stuffed shirt. She called him

that—not I. I didn't think he was that bad. A trifle pompous, yes. But in those days I had trouble making conversation with any man who wasn't in service.

The choice of eating places in Champion City was limited. With a car or a boat we could have gone to Sea 'n' Shore—or the Guava Jelly Inn, which was the best place for miles. But in town there was just one passable café, the Enchilada. I was a proud GI when I escorted Nadine into the place. There was the usual line-up waiting for tables. I placed Nadine at the bar, ordering old-fashioneds. Then I cornered a waiter, slipped him a couple of bucks, and came back. That's when I should have relaxed and left things up to Mammon. But Nadine looked at me and said, "I'm starved!" I kept straining over my shoulder to see what had become of the goddamn waiter.

He claimed us during the second cocktail, and anybody knows that's good time. But it didn't suit me. I fussed like an old woman, insisting on hanging up Nadine's coat myself and very nearly knocking over the rack. The menu appeared unusually fly-specked and ordinary. Finally, intending to sound like the world-weary citizen, I suggested in a peevish whine, "There's one thing here beyond reproach, besides their liquor, and that's the shrimp creole." I fancied the waiter sneered.

I had a moment's elation when the mountain of creole was served, a very handsome set of stuff, and Nadine exclaimed and ate of it heartily. But on my part I could hardly swallow. I couldn't think of anything worth saying. I dribbled food. I spilled coffee. I sprinkled cigarette ashes like a volcano. Oh, it was hell!

"What's the matter with you?" asked Nadine. "Are you sorry you brought me?"

"Sorry!" I blurted. "This is the greatest day of my life!"

I think I originally planned to take her dancing over at the View Vista club by cab. But by the end of dinner, my energies were so exhausted and my mind so feverish, I forgot it. "What do you want to do now?" I asked dispiritedly as we left the restaurant. She said, "Let's just go to a movie." That convinced me I was boring the girl to death. I accompanied her glumly down the street and bought tickets.

"Popcorn?" I said politely.

"After all I've just eaten! Randy, you must be out of your mind!"

It was a typical Saturday-night crowd. In the foyer a big burly corporal walked a squalling infant up and down and as we came into the dark theater we bumped into one of the brass taking little Murgatroyd to the toity. I looked over the audience with fresh misgivings as we stood at the aisle searching for seats. Children rattled papers on candy bars. Unmarried couples pitched woo. New mothers breast-fed their young. GIs furnished sound effects for the film, hissing and making kissing noises.

"Let's try the balcony," I suggested, my intelligence reviving faintly. I took Nadine's arm as we climbed. "We'll probably encounter rats on the balustrade," I said, "but there won't be so many babies up here."

We clambered over feet and knees in the gloom and fell into musky seats. I was too sunk in my dejection to pay at-

tention to the show. Fancy bringing my girl to a place like this on our first date! When at last the feature came to an end I sat up, saying briskly, "Let's go!" "No," said Nadine. "Let's stay and see what we missed." I thought, the girl must hate me! A travelogue came on, one of the saccharine kind where we leave dear old Bunco-Bunco, Land of the Hog-callers, and sail away into the sunset. Oh dandy, I thought, this is the crowning touch.

But instead of Bunco-Bunco, we were treated to one of Florida's own blurb spots! Laughing Water Springs, an easy drive from Champion City. I suppose every homesick soldier in the theater had been sucked in on it. The place was a drab hole, scrub pine and sand, a wisp of Spanish moss, one bush of hibiscus, a navigable trickle of water. But ah, the film! Color and magic, music and song, flower banks, speedboats, surfboards, bathing girls, colored fish, underwater swimming. "River of sunshine and nature's wonderland . . ." Inconceivable! The audience was so stunned that at first it didn't make a sound. Then a big bull voice yelled out, "Is zat supposed to be Florida???" and the house came down. Cat calls, raucous laughter, hoots, howls, jeers, moaning and groaning. I laughed until I almost fell out of my seat. Nadine had never been to the Springs and could only surmise the joke, but even she laughed so hard the tears rolled down her cheeks.

I was still chuckling when we came out. I said, "I swear I don't see how they got those pictures! Out in Colorado that place wouldn't even rate a hotdog stand." I drew Nadine's arm through mine.

"Where are we going now?" she asked.

"Around the corner," I said, temporarily restored from a love-sick lout to a sane man. "To the Hotsie Enda."

Now this was something like. There in the Saturday night mêlée of the busiest bar in town, I bribed another table, where we could be alone with two hundred other people. We held hands and I ordered drinks, adding the fatuous words, "Lots of ice, make them tall!" And when the drinks came they were the usual brownish viscous scum in the bottom of a three-inch glass.

We danced, worming our way into the maggoty mass on a nine-by-twelve floor. The music, what little could be heard, issued from a perspiring four-man orchestra. There was no time to concentrate on the joy of Nadine in my arms. I was too busy warding off collision and executing mad turns from the path of jitterbugs. I gave up. "Much as I want to dance with you," I said, reluctantly releasing Nadine at the edge of the floor, "I can't reconcile myself to having you trampled to death."

While we picked our way back to the table, I noticed two guys over by the wall giving Nadine the evil eye, acquaintances of mine, a staff sergeant and a corporal who liked to think of themselves as a couple of smooth lechers. They'd been on me a few times about the AWOL, and I let them rave. God, they couldn't have imagined anyone overstaying leave just to be decent and civilized for a few days! All they knew was shacking up with a bottle and some hag. One of them wigwagged his eyebrows at me knowingly. I ignored him.

I saw them approaching as soon as we were seated. They

moved in on us and stood one on either side of the table. I knew what was coming. I drew a disgusted breath and leaned back slightly on the hind legs of my chair, waiting.

The corporal said, "So you spent your AWOL with a sick friend. Now that was real nice of you."

The sergeant said, "Them little acts of mercy pays off, I always say." They were ogling Nadine like a couple of boa constrictors. The sergeant flicked an imaginary speck from his sleeve. "How about introducing your old buddies, pal!" emphasizing each word heavily as though to intimidate me.

I said in a bored tone, "Your little comedy doesn't amuse me, boys. Blow!" I came down on my chair, my shoulders slouched. I glanced at Nadine. She looked so puzzled and alarmed that I smiled at her.

The staff sergeant said, still in that ponderous way, reaching out behind him for an empty chair, "You don't mind if we sit down!"

"Introductions can come later, I always say." The corporal leaned with one elbow on the table, thrusting his face close to Nadine's.

That did it! I came up on my feet and I snagged that buffoon by the blouse with my left hand, jerking him so his face was right in front of mine. "Beat it, you simple twerp!" I pushed him back so he staggered on his heels, almost falling over the next table. I whirled and snatched the chair from the sergeant's hand. He was on the verge of sitting down and did a clumsy Russian dance regaining his balance. I said, "That goes double for you, punk! Scram!" I had the same feeling I used to get casing a perimeter for

snipers. Cool, but plenty tough, plenty itchy, plenty mean.

People stood up at the surrounding tables, some of them moving closer. But I kept my eyes on the sergeant. He was shifting fast. "Okay, pal," he decided, as rapidly as his ape brain would function. "We'll go!" He added for the benefit of the by-standers, "Just making a friendly stop! You don't hafta get sore!" If Nadine hadn't been there, I'd have lammed into him.

The staff sergeant and the corporal started moving off, acting the more unconcerned as the distance grew. I sat back down and looked at Nadine. "Well," I said, trying to sound calm. "I'm due for another drink. How about you?"

Our audience dispersed, buzzing and laughing. Someone —I didn't even turn to see who it was—slapped me lightly across the back, muttering, "Nice work, sergeant!"

Nadine exclaimed, "I—I don't understand! Wha-what happened?"

The anger poisons passing off through my muscles made me feel tired. "Just a couple of bullies," I said. "They thought they could buffalo me." With the help of about four tables along the line I got the waiter's attention and ordered another drink.

"But what were they doing?" Nadine asked.

I noticed for the first time that Nadine was wearing pale blue, soft flannel or something. I said, "You know I really can't blame those mutts for trying."

"You were ferocious!" she declared. "You looked—dangerous!"

I felt good. The waiter set down the drinks and collected. I took a long swallow. I said, "Those guys thought they could take you away from me."

"But that's just silly," Nadine exclaimed. "Why would they try such a stupid thing?"

"That's the answer—they're dumb animals."

Nadine said, "I never dreamed you could be so tough!" She kept looking at me, studying me. Everything I said, she seemed to weigh. I began feeling quite a fellow: unpredictable Peters, deep stuff, mighty mouse.

I didn't want the night ever to end. I walked her home slowly, at one o'clock in the morning, even though the north wind had broken loose again and Nadine was cold. The fireplace in the lobby was down to an ember, but it was still warm and best of all there was no one there.

"Let's build up the fire and sit on the sofa," I said, helping her off with her coat.

"I'm tired, Randy," she said. "I must go to bed."

"Just five minutes," I said. I took a small log from the basket and placed it carefully upon the embers. I pulled the sofa around in front of the fire. Nadine put her coat over a chair and sat beside me.

"I wanted everything so fine this evening," I said. "But I'm afraid you've had a dull time."

"No, I haven't! It's been fun."

I felt happy. I started to put my arm around her, but she turned and caught it and brought it back.

She said, "No, Randy—please."

Remembering that kiss by the vacant lot, I wasn't expecting it somehow. I said, "No?"

"I like you very much," she said. "But I shan't see you any more."

"Not see me!" I repeated idiotically. "In God's name why? I haven't done anything, have I?"

"You've been sweet."

"Oh—'sweet'!" I said. "In a woman's language that always means curtains!"

"No, Randy, don't be angry. It's because of my husband, don't you see? I've never got over him. I won't pretend with you."

I felt my face turn warm. "You're not going to sit around moping over some oaf who walked out on you! Good God! You can give me a chance, can't you? I'm not asking for anything. I just want to be with you."

"But, Randy, what's the good of your liking me a lot, if I can't be fond of you? I don't want to make you miserable—the way I'm doing."

"I'll risk that!" I faced her, laying my arm along the back of the sofa, careful not to touch her. "So you're not in love with me, that's what you're saying, isn't it? And you know damn well I've fallen for you. No need pretending I don't care what you think of me. I feel like I'd been kicked in the stomach. But you can't say you're not going to see me! You can let me try to change your mind."

"It wouldn't be any use," she said in a small voice. "It's Steve I want!" She raised her eyes to mine. "I can't help it, Randy."

"Okay," I said, swallowing the hard dose, being big. "You've told me. And I know you can't help it. We won't talk about that any more. We'll just be a gal and a guy

having dates. Just surface stuff. How's that? I won't bother you, I promise."

"Oh, no!" she said. "That will never work!" She put her arms around my neck and gave me an apologetic little hug, touching her face against mine for just an instant. My arms automatically started closing in, but I didn't quite make it. She stood up. "Good night, Randy. I'm terribly sorry!"

What could I do? I let her go. She took her coat and unlocked the apartment door and went in and closed it. I sat and watched her disappear. And then I went on sitting in front of the fireplace, the little log blazing brightly, while I smoked a series of cigarettes.

I'd been so sure! How much of a fool can a man be?

Cass had given me her only vacant room, the one on the roof. There was no heat up there and I awoke frozen. About ten o'clock I got up and took a hot shower to set the blood circulating. I felt blue and sour. I came downstairs into the lobby and found numerous guests huddled together for warmth, listening to the radio and reading Sunday papers.

The one they called Flugleman, who was hogging the spot nearest the fire, called out, "Sergeant! You'd better pull up a chair and get wahm!" I didn't bother to answer. Then two big giddy old gals overflowing chairs by the radio greeted me with delighted cries.

"It's ten below zero in Boston!"

"New York is gripped in an icy gale!"

"Chicago is digging out from under three feet of snow!"

I said, sarcastically, "Yeah? Almost as cold as Champion

City!" Their faces fell, all four chins quivering. I went on out to the kitchen feeling mean, as though I'd just kicked a couple of fat old spaniels.

There stood Nadine at the counter in sweater, skirt, and apron. I stopped dead-center. "I'm making a war cake," she said, "with a can of Cocomalt." She didn't look at me.

"It's only an excuse to have the oven going," Cass said, coming from her bedroom. "I hope none of my toilets freeze up!"

All day Nadine occupied herself with little tasks. I couldn't catch her alone. Finally she just plain disappeared. I gave up hunting her by the middle of afternoon. I went out to where Cass was sitting in the patio. The sun was shining and, protected there on three sides, it wasn't too bad.

"I'm setting an example for my guests," she said. "I don't want them to get it into their heads that it's cold at the Kumquat May!"

I dropped onto the slats of a low chair. "I think I'll take the early bus back."

Cass was not one to beat about the bush. "I'm sorry, Ran. I like you."

"She doesn't, though."

"She's nursing a hurt. I'd stick around if I were you."

"That son of a bitch! How could she still love him?"

"Those things have to wear off. You can't turn them off like a faucet."

"She looks so soft. So delectable. You could just gather her up like moss, you think. But there's armor under that

camouflage. She's steel! She won't even give me a chance. I'm licked before I start."

"Oh, come now," said Cass. "That's not Roger, my Rover Boy. That's not Tom, my Swift!"

I stood up and unfolded my cap from my belt. I bent over and gave Cass a neat platonic kiss on the cheek. "You're a nice girl, Cassandra. I like you too."

"Where are you going?"

"I guess I'll hunt a bottle to take back to camp. I might as well be drunk as the way I am."

NADINE: *Pick-Ups*

CASS WAS PROVOKED AT ME ABOUT RANDY. SHE CAME into my room Sunday after he had gone. I was sitting at the dressing-table with a deck of cards, playing solitaire. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Hiding!" She seated herself on the bed. "I think you're making a mistake."

I went on turning cards, "I can't take advantage of him when he's in love with me."

"Advantage of him?"

"Yes," I said. "It isn't honorable."

Cass raised her eyebrows. "What strange words you employ in the battle of the sexes! Have you considered the ruthless nature of our enemy?"

"I can't pick on anyone so young."

"Think of yourself as doing him a favor, why can't you?"

"It's indecent!" I insisted.

She contemplated me with her gray eyes, half smiling. Then she stood up, sighing. "Oh, darling, darling! In this foul and dissipated world you are a lamb! I guess I shouldn't try to change you."

The cold wave lasted all week, but by Friday the wind died. On Saturday I went up to the roof deck, lying there

for hours in the sun, thinking of nothing, almost as if I didn't exist. I was alone until late afternoon, when Violet Renn came up, wearing a white sun-suit and carrying an enormous bottle of oil. She sat down on the pad next to mine and began covering her arms and legs. "Help me," she begged. "I have to be careful of freckles." So I got to my knees and poured oil in my hand and went over her back.

"You're lucky," she said. "Your skin isn't dry. But I guess brunettes can stand sun better than blondes."

I lay down again and she began to flounce about on her pad. She turned and twisted, first on her stomach, then on her back, trying to get an even coat on every square inch. Once she sat up and bared her hard little breasts. But apparently it occurred to her that someone might be looking with field glasses from over in the park, so she pulled her suit up again.

"You've been married, haven't you?" she asked, coming down on her stomach for the third time. "I've had so many chances, but I couldn't make up my mind. Young men are selfish. Even when they're crazy about me, they demand so much, with nothing in return. I like older men best. They treat a girl with more consideration." She didn't seem to expect a reply. "All that fuss about sex," she went on. "If you ask me, it's overrated. Some of the things Raydella Rose tells, I don't half believe. Either that, or she's a nymphomaniac. She'd have to be, don't you think, with all kinds of men pawing over her all the time?" She said it bitterly, and she turned her head and looked at me.

For the life of me I couldn't answer. I had the oddest thought. Was Violet a virgin? Or pretending? I got to my

feet. "I guess I'll go down," I said. "I've had enough sun."

"Wait! Let's go to dinner together tonight. I want to try the Enchilada, and I can't alone. It just so happens I don't have a date—I can't remember when I haven't had one on Saturday night. But of course I'm not acquainted yet."

"Just the two of us go to the Enchilada!"

"That's nothing. Women go everywhere nowadays."

"The place will be filled with soldiers," I said.

She shrugged. "Oh, well, we don't have to pay any attention to them."

"I don't want to go," I said.

Violet dropped all pose. "Please, Nadine!" she cried. "Please. I'll die without a date. It's different with you. You've been married. But I'm so restless."

I felt sorry for her, I don't know why. I said, "All right. I'll go."

I went downstairs. Cass wasn't there. She'd driven to St. Petersburg with Stanley. It occurred to me she'd be glad, anyway, if I went somewhere. Violet came running over twice from her cottage—once to see what I was wearing and whether I liked her hair piled on top of her head, and once to say we'd better go early or we wouldn't get a table. I couldn't understand why she was so excited.

At the Enchilada we were put against the wall, in full view of the bar, lined solid with soldiers. I felt self-conscious, even though there were women alone at some of the other tables. It wasn't that I cared—in my whole life I never cared so little what I did as that winter in '45, but it was hard for me to get used to things.

"It's too early to eat," Violet said. "Let's have a long drink." She ordered a Cuba Libre and I got one too. She kept glancing up at the bar and every little while she took out her compact and powdered her nose and checked on her lipstick, rattling on about all her boy friends up north. Suddenly one of her glances caught. She stared a moment, her mouth parted slightly. She dropped her eyes. But instantly she lifted them, smiled as though against her will, then lowered her lids again, portraying perfect confusion. I looked up to see what had inspired all this. And there, half-turned on his stool at the bar, sat a great handsome brute of an officer, bursting with shoulders and muscles, in immaculate uniform. His features were so perfectly regular that he seemed to be cut out of cardboard. He was staring at Violet.

Violet turned on a great show of animation. She babbled, "Aren't you glad we came? Isn't it fun? I just know I'm going to love Florida. Only I do wish it would get warm enough for the beach! I've been there twice with Raydella Rose, but it was deserted. No cute men or anything——" She interrupted herself. "Don't look now, but that stunning man at the bar hasn't taken his eyes off me. I hardly know what to do!"

A waiter stopped at our table. "The Major wants to buy you two girls a drink."

Violet leaned forward. "Should we?" And instantly, before I could answer, turned to the waiter ordering, "Two Martinis."

When the waiter left, I asked, "Why did you order those? On top of rum and coke!"

Violet whispered, "Martinis are so much more sophisticated!"

The cocktails arrived with our appetizer. Violet held up her glass, smiled and nodded at the handsome officer, and began sipping it daintily. Mine tasted horrible; I couldn't get it down. When we started on our dinner, the Major turned his back, engrossed in conversation with a soldier seated beside him. Violet was piqued. "That certainly is odd," she commented. "Why should he send us a drink, and then ignore us? After all it was his own idea!" Her animation gradually subsided. By the time we had finished dessert and smoked a cigarette with our coffee, her face was dark and cold.

We paid our bill and got into our jackets and gloves. I could hardly wait to leave. The waiter reappeared. In a flat voice he told us, "The Major would like you to join him at the bar." Instantly Violet recovered her spirits and began flashing her eyes and scintillating.

"See," she whispered, clutching my arm, "how he sends the waiter instead of coming himself! That fellow's been around."

I felt like a nickel. "He doesn't want me," I said, "I'll just go on home."

"Don't be silly," Violet protested. "That would look terrible!"

I didn't know what to do. The Major stood up as we approached. There were no extra seats. He indicated his stool for Violet. "I couldn't let my beautiful blonde go without buying her another drink," he said, his eyes bright and expressionless.

Violet glanced at herself in the mirror. "No, really, Major, we mustn't! We only came over to thank you."

"Silly girl!" said the Major and lifted her on the stool.

I stood there like a dope. The Major, indicating me with his thumb, said brusquely to the soldier beside him, "You take that one!" I would gladly have vanished through the floor.

The soldier looked up from his drink and we eyed each other in the mirror. He swung around slowly and smiled at me. He said, "I'll take a chance—if you will!" His smile was remarkable, the only conspicuous thing about him. His teeth were exceptionally white and even. For the rest of it, he was just soldier. An ordinary round face with blue eyes and short light hair. I sensed at once that he was a nice guy, even while we traded places and I took his seat. He had a tech sergeant's rating on his sleeve.

He said, "My name's Quintin Reese. What's yours?"

I told him and then I said, with my face still hot with embarrassment, "I'm afraid I was wished off on you."

"I'm glad about the whole thing," was his reply. "That other babe is too flashy for my taste."

I glanced at Violet, hoping she hadn't heard; but she was oblivious to everything but the Major. He was saying, with that same eager blank smile, "The minute I looked at you, I knew it was Kismet!"

We were uncomfortably crowded. The two men hardly had room to stand beside us. After one drink Quintin suggested we go on to the Raven or the Hotsie Enda. Violet said she liked the Hotsie Enda best. I was afraid I'd run into Randy; I wanted to go home. But I didn't know how

to get away. The Major sauntered casually on out the door with Violet, while the Sergeant caught the check. We cut through an arcade, past darkened shops and offices instead of going around the block. Suddenly, up ahead of us, the Major caught Violet off her feet and swung her high into the air. She squealed and screeched until he put her down. She was laughing madly.

"Oh," she said as we caught up, "he was telling me how he lifts bar-bells. When I didn't catch on, he said, 'Here—I'll show you,' and he threw me into the air! Isn't he perfectly awful!" They went on ahead of us again, Violet hanging on his arm. She looked little beside his huge figure.

We went into the swarming Hotsie Enda and found a table. I looked all around, relieved when I didn't see Randy. We ordered drinks and Quintin and I danced. He led conservatively, holding me around the waist, and I decided he must be about my own age. He didn't do any of that out-to-the-side stuff like Randy. Violet, dancing with the Major, was having a merry time, laughing gayly up at him, while he squeezed her and showed her how strong he was.

Quintin and I gave up dancing because of the crowd. I thought how strange it was. Here was I with another sergeant, doing the same things over again. And the coincidence went on in a curious distorted way, with the threat of another fight. Violet came back to the table with her head high, the Major following.

"I've never been so insulted in my life!" she declared. "Really I'm almost in tears." The Major pulled his chair

close to hers and took her hand, his mouth pulled down now into the proper expression of sympathy.

"You say the word," he told her, "and I'll go hit that guy!"

Violet drooped piteously. "Oh no, no. Please. I couldn't bear making a scene." She looked over at me. "Some dreadful soldier made the most horrid remark about me—I can't tell you what it was." She turned back to the Major. "I don't even know what he meant! But I know it was insulting!"

The Major swelled his muscles until I thought he would burst his seams. "He was just a little guy," he explained. "I didn't dare hit him. I'd have killed him." He said to Quintin, "Some drunken private. I didn't want to make trouble for him." Quintin said nothing.

Violet said in a stricken voice, "Nadine, come with me to the ladies' room." Quintin lifted slightly from his chair as we got up to leave. But the Major bounded to attention. "Come back soon! I'll be waiting!" His mouth reverted into the split grin. I turned away.

Violet went ahead through the lounging mob of soldiers. Just as soon as we came into the washroom, she clutched my hand, whispering, "That private eased up to us while we were dancing, Nadine! He said, 'What's the trouble, Major? Can't she wait till she gets home?' Can you think how I felt, in front of that wonderful man!" I managed a sympathetic murmur, feeling almost as false as the Major.

The washroom was crowded and dirty, paper towels with lipstick smears kicked across the floor. Violet expertly shouldered her way through the group of women before

the long mirror, selecting a space near the corner and pulling me in after her. A shelf ran above the washbasins and Violet reached into her purse and rapidly lined up cosmetics. I fooled with my hair and touched up my lips. Violet went to work in earnest, opening a huge compact and piling pancake makeup on her nose with a rubber sponge. She put mascara on her eyelashes, lavender shadow cream on her lids, and penciled her eyebrows—all the time talking in a half-whisper.

"The Major is crazy about me. Have you noticed? Isn't he the best-looking thing? And such a gentleman. That's what counts. Did you notice how he jumped to his feet when we left? I like that—a man who will open and close doors for me and look after me as if I were precious. He says he adores me. Can you imagine? Already!" Violet stopped to paint a new mouth, dipping a tiny brush into glistening grape pigment. "But you know, I have the strangest feeling," she went on. "He said it was Kismet, and I do believe it is. Isn't it remarkable that this should happen so soon after our talk on the roof?"

I couldn't think of anything to say. She was through with her face and now she took out a long black rat-tail comb and began to work over each curl, rewinding expertly with the pointed end. I leaned back against the wall, waiting. "I've had men fall for me before," she said, "but never like this. I'll bet he proposes yet tonight!" The thought so overcame her that she left off with her hair and put away the comb. She shoveled all the jars off the shelf back into her purse. "What will I do?" she said, her face vivid with

excitement and new makeup. "A girl can't know her own mind that fast, can she?"

It was midnight when we left. The waiter collected from Quintin again for the last drinks. It seemed to me the Major was always away from the table or busy talking to someone on the side whenever drinks came up. But I supposed the men had made some prearrangement. Quintin brought us home in a cab, with the Major hugging Violet on his lap, and as soon as we pulled up, the Major and Violet went on into the lobby. I waited while Quintin paid the cab.

The Kumquat was completely quiet and dark. Cass wasn't home yet. We went on back into the kitchen to mix another drink. I'd had more than enough, so I sipped some ginger ale. Quintin was hungry and I made him a sandwich and put the coffee on. But the Major and Violet didn't want anything to eat. They took their drinks out into the lobby and closed the apartment door after them. Quintin and I sat at the kitchen table talking, I didn't know for how long, when suddenly I started up.

"Was that Violet?" I said.

"I didn't hear anything," said Quintin.

"I thought I heard her call."

"It couldn't be," Quintin said. "Not the way they were acting."

I listened, but I heard nothing. "It's funny," I said uncomfortably. "I have the oddest feeling that she's been calling me for a long time."

Then I definitely heard the sound. "It *is* Violet!"

I jumped and ran through the apartment and opened the door. It was all dark in the lobby and at first I could make out nothing. I heard Violet sobbing and then almost at once she threw herself upon me from the darkness, crying hysterically.

"What the hell's going on?" Quintin asked behind me. He found a lamp and snapped the switch.

The Major stood up blinking foolishly. "I lost my head," he said woodenly. "She got me excited. I lost my head!"

Violet began to curse between sobs. "The dirty bastard!" she cried. "Look at my dress! See what he's done!" Her dress and slip were torn all the way down the front. Her brassiere had been ripped off and lay on the floor. She was covered with gouges and scratches and one of her breasts was bleeding.

It made me furiously angry. "You get out of here," I told him. "Get out of this house!"

Quintin said, "Yeah, bud. You better beat it."

"I called you," Violet sobbed. "I kept calling."

"The door was closed. I couldn't hear."

"He choked me. He stuffed my mouth."

The Major was standing there still blinking. Quintin went to him and gave him a push. "You better get going, unless you want me to call the MP's." He thrust the Major's cap in his hand.

The Major's face began to crack, his open mouth quivering. He dropped his cap back to the floor. He began to cry. "I lost my head," he wept. "Blondie there is the first girl in years who's appealed to me. And I lost my head." Great

tears splashed down his face. He lunged toward Violet and tried to kiss her hand. Violet jumped away screaming, clutching her dress together.

"We'll wake everyone in the place," I said. "Violet, you go back to my room and stay—until we get rid of this goon."

"I won't leave," sobbed the Major, turning to the wall and burying his face in his arms. "I won't part from my beautiful blonde until she says she forgives me. It's all her fault anyway. She led me on. She led me on!"

"Oh Jesus!" Quintin said. "Is he plastered!"

Well, we had a mess on our hands. Luckily none of the guests wakened and came down. Finally we called a cab and Quintin got the Major out on the terrace. I stood in the doorway watching.

"Listen," Quintin said to me. "You're going to be around, aren't you?" The Major's knees buckled under him and Quintin slapped him hard across the face to make him stand up. "I shoulda called the MP's," he said, turning back to me. "What I started to say, I want to see you again."

"You call me," I told him. "I'll be here."

The next morning Cass fixed a breakfast tray when I told her what had happened and took it over to Violet's cottage. Then I helped Cass make up the rooms, and afterward we went out and sat in the patio.

"I don't know whether Violet knows what she's doing," I said. "But she did lead him on."

"Am I sick of that alibi!" Cass remarked. "Ever since

Eve! And he wouldn't hit a man smaller than himself, oh no! That would be poor sportsmanship. But he'd take a girl no bigger than a red squirrel and half kill her!"

The shell-maker ladies drove into the parking lot, home from church. They came hurrying up the back walk, but seeing us lounging in the shade of the orange tree, they cut over. "Here come my pachyderms," said Cass fondly.

Ernesta called, before they reached us, "We have a date to play shuffleboard!"

"We did the most awful thing," Dot said, halting beside us. "We picked up a man at the Lyric Cafeteria!"

Ernesta's eyes shone. "Poor papa will turn over in his grave! But this is such a nice man! He's shared our table several times, and he always brings our water!"

Dot put in, "He has white hair and such a noble patrician face. He's going to teach us to play shuffleboard!"

"That's swell," Cass said. "Have fun."

They started away, breaking into a little trot. Ernesta stopped at the terrace to call back, "When we get to know him well enough, we're going to make him a tie-clasp!"

Cass stretched out her legs. "Aren't they wonderful? They have a better time than anybody."

Corsie turned into the walk from the street, also home from church. She smiled, and stopped to talk only a minute. Her overseas letters were coming through again. "My husband writes that he thinks the war in Europe will be over soon."

"Is he all right, Corsie?" I asked.

Her face turned sad. "He says so. I wish I knew. He says

they're sending him back to the front." She was silent a moment. "If anything happens to him," she said angrily, "they can just take me out and shoot me too! I'm not going to have any part of life without him!" She lifted her head, turned abruptly and left us, going on into her cottage.

We were silent a few minutes. Then I said, "It's all very well for Corsie to think that. But it's not so easy just to stop living."

"You can say that again," Cass murmured softly.

The door to Number Three opened. "Good heavens," I said. "Here comes Violet!" She looked a total wreck. Her hair hung bedraggled and stringy. She had purple circles under her eyes and big bruises on her arms and neck.

"Oh," she moaned, lowering herself carefully into a canvas chair. "I ache all over."

Out in front a cab was stopping. A soldier got out. "Maybe that's Randy!" said Cass, sitting up eagerly.

"No," I said. "It's Quintin."

"He's got a nerve," Violet said. "Coming here after last night!"

Quintin walked slowly toward us, looking all around. "Hello," he said to me, stopping several feet away and shifting his weight, glancing at the others. "I wanted to see if everything was all right."

I introduced him to Cass and motioned to a chair. He sat down stiffly. "Did you get rid of the Major?" I asked him.

"That was the toughest detail I've had since I joined the army," he said, loosening up. "I just don't understand guys

like that." He shook his head and repeated, "No sir, I just don't understand!"

Violet snapped, "If your friend ever comes near me again I'll have him arrested!"

"Hey! Lady!" Quintin held up his hand in protest. "I never saw that bird before in my life! He just started talking to me at the bar."

"But you paid all the checks!" I exclaimed.

Quintin looked embarrassed again. "Yeah. He is not only a Grade A heel, but a first-class chiseler besides."

Cass was sitting back, taking Quintin in. She gave a little sniffing laugh at Quintin's description. I asked him, "But why did you let him get away with it? Because of his rank?"

"Naw, gosh! I just figured meeting you was worth it," he blurted. Suddenly he relaxed in his chair. He turned on his nice smile, the whiteness of his teeth flashing. "I didn't want to make trouble in front of you. I could tell you weren't used to—well, being picked up."

It was almost noon. Cass had shifted her chair to stay in the shade. We sat talking. Then Quintin asked if I'd have Sunday dinner with him, and I went to change my clothes. Quintin moved up on the terrace to wait, and Cass followed me into my room.

"You like that fellow better than Randall Peters?" she asked incredulously.

I pulled a skirt over my head. "No, of course not. But he's older, and he's kind of settled and easy-going. I feel at home with him."

Cass shook her head. "I don't like it, baby. Not one bit!

No good my saying so, I suppose. But I hate to see you sell yourself short."

I touched Cass on the arm to reassure her. "This isn't important! Not to Quintin, nor to me."

"I hope not," she said gloomily. "He looks harmless enough, God knows."

We had a series of dates, Quintin and I. He came into town about every night. We went regularly to the Enchilada and sat at the bar. I took to drinking bourbon with him. About eleven o'clock he'd walk me home, kiss me goodnight, and leave at a lope to catch the midnight bus. He was pleasant. It was something to do.

One night, when we were sitting at the bar in the Enchilada as usual, Mr. Hovey came in. He was very drunk, with a crumpled collar, and red eyes popping in his pudgy face. I always managed to avoid him at the Kumquat May. He came straight up to us, laid a hot moist hand on my shoulder and one on Quintin's back.

"I'll buy a drink," he said in a loud voice, teetering up and down on his toes. "I'm passing through the bars, touching every young man with the word of God. Only one word —that's all that's needed for a hook to pull him in!" His eyes glinted. "Let the preachers have their churches! I come where I'm needed——" and he pounded Quintin on the back. Now he turned to look at me, screwing up his eyes shrewdly. "I've seen this young lady. She has a spiritual face. But I've been wondering!" He punched Quintin in the ribs. "The Devil is a fisherman too! Could she be set among men as bait?"

I squirmed in panic. "Okay, Grandpa," Quintin said, scrambling down from his stool. He shoved Mr. Hovey across the room. "Keep away from us!"

People were grinning. Hovey walked perfectly steadily to the end of the bar and ordered a boiler-maker. He was terribly offended and stood there glaring at us.

"Let's go!" I said.

"We don't have to leave on his account. You don't let that old lush worry you, do you?"

"No. But I don't want to look at him."

We went outside. The sky was powdered with pale stars. The fresh breeze blowing in from the southwest smelled good. I thought of spice islands. I let my coat hang open, warm on the heavy bourbon. We turned down Mango Street toward home, and I put my arm through his.

He said in a low voice, "I don't suppose you'd ever come to my room, would you?"

"Your room! I didn't know you had one."

"Yeah. I've had one almost every night. But I never had the nerve to ask."

Oh, the spicy wind! I breathed it. The palms. The sand. The rustling, weed-grown lots. "You didn't have the nerve?"

He drew a deep sigh. "You're pretty classy for me."

"Why, Quintin!" I stopped. "What a thing to say!" and I kissed him, standing on the deserted sidewalk. My limbs felt languid. The whisky numbed. The fever stirred. I thought, what have I to lose? I said, "All right. I'll go with you." He turned me in the other direction and we walked in silence across the town.

We came to a cheap hotel. Quintin caught my shoulders and swung me to face him in the dim yellow light of a street lamp. "You know I'm married, don't you?"

I nodded. "I thought maybe you were."

"She doesn't mean anything. When the war started she was handy and I married her. But we don't get along, and she'd rather stay back home than be here with me. I haven't any kids, or anything like that. But I wanted you to know."

I patted his face. "Thanks, Quintin!"

We turned and went into the hotel.

I lay looking at dingy walls, witness to a thousand sweating bodies, twined and free. I could tell Cass, "His manners were nice! He was not offensive!" (Cass, mourning, "Oh, no, Nadine! Not Quintin!") I felt a tear, that Cass should feel so bad. . . . But how could I be either glad or sorry? When it was nothing. Automatic. Animalistic. Without meaning. I thought out of blankness past grieving, "So this is what women settle for! So the wild sweet dream of love that was mine with Steve was the cultivated rare thing—never the rule!"

I felt pity and love and understanding for my sex and my fellow animals. I thought I knew a lot.

NADINE: *At the Beach*

I MADE QUINTIN GO ALONG TO THE BEACH ONE SUNDAY. Cass was driving some of the girls in the station wagon. Quintin objected. "Hell, a fella hates to hang around with a bunch of women!" He stayed half sore on the ride over. As soon as we got there, we sent him to the beach house for wind-breakers, and he was gone so long I thought he had deserted us. The wind whipping across the sand was cold, and we huddled under towels and robes, getting madder by the minute. Then, there he came, wearing rented trunks, with hairy chest and sinewy thighs, lugging big rolls of striped canvas under each arm, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"Hurry up!" I called.

He erected the wind-breakers a few feet apart, the open side toward the south, pushing the pointed stakes with great deliberation into the sand. Cass and Corsie took one and Quintin and I the other. Raydella Rose and Violet cut loose from us at once. There was a tea dance going on in the View Vista club. They were in backless dresses, Raydella Rose's thin shoulder blades poking out like small, sun-blackened wings.

The clubhouse sat up on a rise, a big white building with

flags waving on a red roof, and French doors opening on a screened veranda overlooking the Gulf. We were camped at the far north end, nearer the beach house and the curve of cabanas, on the fringe of the crowd. "Oh boy," Raydella Rose said, looking away toward the club entrance where brown figures milled. She pretended to spit on her hands and rubbed them together. "I hope it's dark enough in there to hide my crowsfeet." Violet was stirred into a froth of excitement. She seemed as certain as ever that this was the day of her big romance. The two of them set off arm-in-arm for the fray.

Quintin, lazing on the sand, shielded from the wind, recovered his good humor. Cass, Corsie, and he were all lying down, but I sat up to watch. The vast stretch of white beach was broken into squares of striped green wind-breakers and circles of colored umbrellas, dotted everywhere with red and blue and yellow bathing suits. Two reedy boys raced crazily as comets imperiling all sunbathers. Down near the water's edge a bronzed clump of soldiers were doing tumbler stunts.

Raydella Rose came flying across the sand to report. She postured gayly in front of Cass. "Men are swarming! We tell 'em our names are Rose and Violet and they think we're kidding! So for last names, I just say, 'Blushing' and 'Shrinking!' But natchly I give them the right telephone number!" Her burnt face drew up in a soundless laugh. She turned from us and went rushing back. Quintin rolled over to doze on his stomach. "I can't stand that scarecrow of a woman," he commented.

"Oh, you men!" I said irritably. "You never like any

woman who has a mind of her own. You just want some demure pushover."

He reached out and caught my hand. "I like you, don't I?"

"Well isn't that what I just said?"

"Now, honey!" he protested.

I pushed him away. "Go back to sleep."

A few feet from us Cass and Corsie talked intermittently in low tones, both wearing dark glasses, Cass with her hair protected by a white cap. I saw only three swimmers the whole afternoon, all men. Two of them raced, cutting furious rhythm through the waves. Emerging, the hairy one dripped sleek as a walrus; the thin one was blue with purple lips. Pretty soon, I thought, I would rouse Quintin and make him run with me along the water's edge where the sand was packed and wet.

My eyes were heavy from the glare. I rested my head on my knees, clasping my hands at my ankles, shutting my lids. When I looked up again, in the distance I saw Raydella Rose and Violet coming from the clubhouse, each hanging on to a soldier for dear life. They were dragging their victims to show us. I stretched my neck and called, "Cass! Look!" She sat up, and began to laugh. Raydella Rose was plowing far out in the lead, making no effort to keep her high heels from sinking into the sand. She talked a mile a minute to her quarry. As soon as she was close enough to make herself heard, she began hopping up and down.

"Look, Ma!" she screamed. "Dates!" She was gripping a young GI with wiry black hair.

I glanced back to Violet, and stiffened with a horrid shock. The tall gangly fellow whose arm she clutched bent drunkenly over her, not looking at us. Even from the distance I knew it was Randy.

They arrived in front of us. Raydella Rose was rattling away. ". . . Of course they're blistered, and unsteady on their pins. But they're men! This one wants to go to the can, but I won't let him. I'm afraid he'll get away!" Her boy friend squinted at us and grinned.

Randy drew up unsteadily. He turned his head from Violet. He saw Cass. He saw me. He took in Quintin, who raised his head sleepily from the sand. I felt the tension across my shoulders. He looked as though he'd been drinking for a long time. He was dry-faced and disheveled. He shook loose from Violet, straightening himself with effort.

"I'm pursued by a horrible fate," he said thickly to Cass. "I can't escape the Kumquat May." He looked over again at me. He didn't speak, but stared in an awful way, his bloodshot eyes sliding to Quintin.

"I wish you'd come and see us, Randy," Cass urged in a terribly kind voice. "I miss you."

Violet said, "He's coming out tonight! We have a date!"

"I've been carried away by the Flower Girls," Randy murmured.

Violet began pulling to get him back to the dance and he let himself be drawn. But he stopped once a little way off and turned again to stare at me. I watched them until they disappeared in the club house. Cass pulled off her glasses and gave me a disgusted look.

Quintin hauled himself up and brushed off sand.

"Let's get a coke," he said, reaching his hand for me. We walked around to the soda fountain at one side of the beach house. Side flaps with green glass were lowered against the wind and glare, creating a darkish under-ocean atmosphere. Round tables with wire chairs, heavily painted against rust, floated across a wave-patterned linoleum. We sat back in the corner.

Abruptly I asked, "How old are you, Quintin?" It seemed to come out of me involuntarily.

"Twenty-seven," he said.

"You mean thirty-seven, don't you?" I said absently, drinking my coke and looking about the room.

"Well, hardly," he replied, laughing. "Everyone thinks I'm older. Must be the way I part my hair."

"Oh no!" I said, coming to. "You can't be exactly twenty-seven! Not even twenty-eight? Or twenty-six?"

"Nope. Twenty-seven my last birthday. Why, what's the difference? Age doesn't mean anything. Jesus, my wife's only twenty-four and she's an old maid!" He reached over, the way he was always doing, enclosed my hand and squeezed it. "You're warm and alive!"

I pulled away. I didn't want any more coke.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"How could I be such a fool?" I wailed to Cass when we got home, going into her room after I'd changed my clothes. "Do you know that Quintin is exactly the same age as Randy!"

"Really?" she said coolly.

"Aren't you surprised?"

"He might be any age, like a three-toed sloth. On him, who could tell?"

"Now, Cass! He's not that bad!"

Cass lifted her hand. "Okay, I'm not arguing." Then she made a tushing noise and began to laugh. "I forgot you ditched Randy because of his tender youth. You degenerate fiend! You Jezebel! Picking on poor little Quintin. Do you think that's honorable?" She stopped to recollect. "What were the rest of those fine words?"

The back door slammed. Violet came charging in, too excited to knock. She was all dressed up in a banana-colored suit, with high-heeled green sandals. Her hair hung shimmering about her shoulders, softening her face. I'd never seen her look better.

"Do you think my new conquest will like me?" she asked, turning around.

We gave her compliments. She went on eagerly, "My, that Randall Peters boy has a wonderful line! You should hear the things he said to me! I can tell he's really struck. Of course he's only a sergeant, but I just know in civilian life he's a gentleman. I wonder how old he is?"

There was a moment of very dead silence. Cass asked, that wicked look still in her eye, "What would you say, Nadine? Do you think he's past the age of consent?"

That night I told Quintin I wouldn't see him any more. He raised no protest and he didn't ask me why. Instead, he said something that made me feel like a toad. His voice was low as he sat there on the steps leading to the sun deck,

looking down at his hands in the moonlight. "I've always known you were too good for me. I wondered how long it would be before you told me."

He wouldn't listen to any of my protests. "There's no use hanging around," he said. "I might as well get it over with."

He put on his cap. He always wore it square on his head. It seemed a little too big, came down too far. And he walked off down the street carrying himself so straight and erect. He never looked back. He never telephoned or tried to see me again.

RANDALL: *Fair Exchange*

I SOBERED UP FAST AFTER THE SHOCK OF SEEING NADINE on the beach with another man. I'd tried hard to drown her out of my system, but just one look put me back where I'd started. I was on the usual week-end pass. I returned downtown to my hotel room and went to work on myself under the shower—hot, cold, hot, cold. I hadn't eaten all day. I called room service and ordered a big meal. I talked a quick press and shoe shine out of the valet. I shaved closely. My face was dry, my lips sore with furred up bits of skin. I rubbed in pomade. I manicured, brushed hair, polished teeth, and guzzled mouthwash. But there wasn't a thing I could do for my bloodshot eyes. I didn't have a clean shirt but was able to buy one at an exorbitant price from guys in the next room. I devoted fifteen precious minutes to sewing on chevrons. The shirt was too tight in the collar, but I wore it anyway.

I'd told Violet to meet me in the lobby of the Kumquat May. But I'd barely set foot on the terrace when she sprang out at me. "You're terribly late!" she cried. I apologized, peering over her head, hoping for some sign of Nadine. Violet stood back, regarding me. "You're all cleaned up!"

she exclaimed in a pleased voice. "My, you look real sharp!" From her expression it dawned on me she was lurking out there to spirit me away before anybody could see what a mess of a date she had! My heart sank to my boots. How must I have looked to Nadine that afternoon?

"Any of my old friends around?" I asked casually.

"No," said Violet. "But isn't it curious? I mean, our meeting, and your knowing people here! It must be fate!"

I raised my eyebrows. She was even sillier than I thought. I took her by the arm. "Let's go into the lobby and talk a minute." But no one was there except Delaney, sitting with a book behind the counter, and Mrs. Flugleman, a flabby mound upon the sofa. Delaney stood up perfunctorily; then, seeing it was I, started to sit down again. I approached with great strides and wrung his hand across the counter. I turned upon Flugleman with a warm smile. "You probably don't remember me!" Both of them stared.

Delaney shrugged and went back to his reading, but Flugleman bounced fast. "Indeed I do," she said, patting the sofa. "I've wanted to have a little talk. You look like a young man of adventure!"

I pulled up a chair for Violet. She sat down, frowning, and began nervously tapping her foot. I assumed the post beside Mrs. Flugleman and passed cigarettes. Flugleman waved them away, "That's one vice I never permitted myself."

"I wish I could say the same," I said, inhaling a great draft. My eyes kept focusing on the closed door to Cass's apartment. I asked, tentatively, "You weren't at the beach with the gang today!"

"I was theah! But I missed them, I can't imagine how."

I felt a stricture in my chest. "That fellow I saw with Nadine Wildraven—is her husband here?"

Flugleman startled me with her peal of laughter. "Heavens, no! Just another boy friend! These young women can't hold a husband. I don't understand it. Dear Mr. Flugleman was devoted to me until the day he died!"

Well, that was one down. "Is this guy a soldier?" I asked.

"Only some sergeant!" she scoffed. Then recalling me, added sweetly, "Of course, that's no disgrace!" That made one down, one even.

"He's very rude," she volunteered. "He won't even speak to me!"

Now damn it, I thought, the guy must be smarter than he looked. Violet emerged from her thundercloud. "I can hardly understand a word you're saying," she protested in a strained voice.

"I'm sorry," I said contritely. "I'm afraid Mrs. Flugleman and I are gossiping about our betters." I turned back to the old scrag beside me, and winked. "Do you think she likes this one?" I murmured.

"She'd like anything!"

"I don't know about that. She didn't like me."

Flugleman reached over and tapped my knee, batting her pale eyes within an inch of my nose. "Fortunate! She'd had you in her clutches!"

That stopped me. The thought of being in Nadine's clutches was so delicious that I basked in the dream.

"Sergeant," hissed Violet, "do let's go somewhere!"

"Why don't you call me Randall?" I asked absently, and muttered to Flugleman, "Where did she meet this fellow?"

Flugleman sniffed. "Some bar!"

"No! What else do you know about him?"

"Very little—except he hangs around here night in and night out."

That finished it. I felt sick. "Well," I said dismally, "I guess I'd better be going."

"What about our date?" exclaimed Violet. I looked at her blankly.

Just then Nadine came in from the terrace. I didn't hear her come; I glanced up and saw her standing there. She had on that pale blue flannel dress again, with a white sweater pulled across her shoulders. There was a damp sheen about her hair and skin, as though she'd been outside for a long time, and I looked around, relieved to find that the man from the beach wasn't with her.

"Hello, Randy!" she said gently, her eyes smiling.

I sprang to my feet. "Hello . . ."

"It's nice to see you again."

"Nice to see you," I echoed. I came out of my daze and began blustering. "Well," I said, reaching into the ether for something to impress her with, "Violet and I were about to run down and look over the new Zanzibar Hotel. I understand they finally got it opened up!"

Nadine had her hand on the apartment door. "I've heard it's very nice," she said, smiling—and she was gone.

I sank back upon the sofa, staring at the door. I came to a slow realization that Violet was up out of her chair, prancing, goggling into a gigantic compact. I got reluc-

tantly to my feet. "What would you like to do?" I asked dully.

"You're such a tease, Randall! The Zanzibar's just perfect!"

I hate to confess that I continued this madness. I rushed Violet, telephoning every night and dating as often as I could get in from the base. She bored me. She was colder than an eel. It must have been masochism on my part, for the chances of a glimpse of Nadine were slim. I became pals with all the inmates of the Kumquat. I led conversations round and round for news. I learned Nadine had stopped seeing the rival sergeant, and that was worth a lot. Then something else happened to give me fits. Nadine struck up a great friendship with a new guest, an Esther somebody, quite an attractive tall girl with a coil of black hair on the nape of her neck. She was on a two-week vacation, and Nadine was helping her make every minute count. Each afternoon the two of them set out for a round of cocktail lounges. I thought of the wolves howling in the streets and shuddered.

I'd hotfoot out and collect Violet in the evening, then try to hit the same spot where Nadine and her friend might be. Schoolboy stuff, yes—but more than that. I had a morbid dread something might happen to her. Many a thug was window-dressed in a uniform, and here was this lovely thing innocently roaming the bars; why wouldn't I worry? Cass, I'm sure, got wise to me, but she didn't let on, except to drop extra-broad hints where the girls might be. The new Zanzibar was the best bet, and being the

swank spot of the moment it seemed natural enough that Violet and I should keep dropping in while they were there. If Nadine caught me watching her, I'd swing into an act with Violet, bowling her over with sudden attentions. Any other girl but Goldilocks would have caught on.

All this asininity came to a sudden sickening halt. Picture me, the jungle GI Joe, lounging on a white leather love seat at the Zanzibar, listening to piano and clarinet, drinking a Zombie and flicking cigarette ash into a huge pink seashell, a comely wren twittering at my elbow. Riding the crest, wouldn't you say? Nadine had just danced past in the arms of a flight officer—and he was one hell of a fine-looking blond chap. He was holding her closely, his cheek touching her temple. Nadine didn't see me. Her eyes were closed.

Dear God, I said to myself, what am I doing here? I turned so sarcastic that even Violet finally got sore. "If you're going to be so horrid," she protested, "I don't want ever to see you again!" I said, "I'll buy that." She sniffled most of the way home and I shoved her along in glum silence. I lifted my cap and left her at her cottage door. That night I decided to take another shot at growing up.

I built my resources all week. I refrained from contact with the Kumquat May. At least I was glad the Violet deal was done. When I came in from base on Friday night, I headed straight from the bus for the Hotsie Enda, planted myself at the bar, and ordered a beer. I leaned on my elbows, staring into the glass. Two beers later, some people came in and took the vacant stools to my right. I didn't

bother to look up. I heard a small startled sound, and a soft voice said, "Why, Randy Peters, hello!"

And there sat Nadine. Delivered into my hands. She was wearing a coat but no hat, the bloom of night excitement upon her, and she was smiling. All my firm resolves melted. She said, "I just had a chocolate soda. Do you suppose a beer would hurt me?"

"It would be suicide," I said gruffly, wondering how many people could hear the commotion in my chest.

"All right then," she said, "I'll get ale."

She introduced me to her girl friend and the very officer who had been my stalemate. He sat down on the other side of Esther. "What gives?" I asked Nadine, catching a faint glimmer of hope.

"He and Esther are having a vacation romance!"

"Well!" I said feelingly. "They make a handsome couple!"

I hovered hungrily over every precious word while she told me she'd gone for a walk by herself and stopped in for a soda. "And they went past and saw me through the window and insisted I come with them for a drink. Now wasn't that foolish?"

As simple as that! After I'd tortured myself dragging Violet around for decoy!

Nadine asked, "Where's Violet?"

"Dunno. Don't care."

"Have you had a quarrel?"

I gave her a look. "We never had anything to quarrel about. I've only been seeing her because of you."

I think Nadine was really surprised, though I can't im-

agine why. "But Violet's crazy about you!" she said.

"Nonsense. Violet is crazy about Violet."

"Oh, Randy. I can't believe you'd be so silly. Why didn't you just call and see me?"

I gave a hollow laugh. "I've had so much encouragement!"

"Well, if it weren't for Violet, I would like to see you now."

"What's Violet got to do with it?"

"She says you're going to be married."

"What!" My voice woke everybody at the bar.

How easy it all seemed when the confessions were on the table. I confessed I was sick with my love for her, and she said, "Randy, try not to be in love with me! But I'd see you, truly I would, if it weren't for Violet."

"A pox on Violet," I said.

"No. She's a friend of mine and I like her. I know she's awful where men are concerned, but she's very proud. It would be too mean to humiliate her."

I thought awhile. "I think a slight switch could be arranged."

"Like what?"

"Well, she's really sick of me. We'll have a double date. I'll bring along a fellow ostensibly for you. Then, by prearrangement, he courts Violet behind my back, sweeping her off her feet, and taking her away from me. The two of us are left holding the bag. Violet's pride is saved. And you and I, objects of pity, will turn to each other for such poor comfort as we can find."

Nadine laughed. "No, Randy! That's terrible!" But her eyes sparkled. "Besides, it would never work. Violet wouldn't do such a mean thing."

"Want to bet?" I asked. "I'll make you a sporting proposition. If you win you have the choice of saying yes or no when I ask you for dates. If I win, you have to see me six times in a row whether you want to or not."

"Okay," she replied, and took my hand on it. She put her little hand in mine in utter confidence and I had a tough time letting it go. And I got to walk her home—although she wouldn't let me take her in for fear Violet might see us.

It was all easy. I knew a dozen fellows who would do, but I finally selected one of my good brother rats, Chauncey Hughes. He was a good-looking rodent and I'd seen him really put on the pressure act with the girls. Also he had a car. Violet would like that. She fell for the double-date routine. She wanted to bring Raydella Rose, but I improvised glibly, saying the fellow had spotted Nadine and was dying to meet her. We went to a joint on the outskirts of town, the Valencia Gardens or some dumb name, where the props were pseudo-Spanish—velvet draperies hung from spears and paper roses in black glass vases. I thought it would make a good backdrop.

Chaunce was a natural. The only one who acted guilty was Nadine. Her eyes were overlarge and her shoulders tense as though any moment she expected a tap from the cops. When we first came in I did have one misgiving. As we seated the girls at the table, Chaunce looked at me and

said wickedly, "I'm satisfied with what I've already got!" And I said, "One false move and I'll bash your face in!" I was bigger than he, and I meant what I said. Nadine blushed scarlet, but cotton-brained Violet never caught the pitch.

On our first exchange of dances, Nadine said, "Randy, I don't think we ought to go through with this!"

I said, "The die is cast. The whole thing is going to please Violet. You'll see. It's the nicest thing we could do for her."

Chaunce really did a job—so good, in fact, that I think he believed it himself. We exchanged every other dance and he worked on Violet sub rosa the whole evening, softening her up. And about eleven-thirty, over a lot of pretty feminine protests while Nadine and I considerately had our backs turned at the bar, he whisked her away. The low characters actually drove off and left us, and a long way from home too. Nadine was nonplussed, but I was hilarious over the prospect of six sure dates with my girl. She was surprised at Violet. And I was surprised that she was surprised.

"She's as vain as a peacock," I said. "Anyone who fed her compliments could get her."

"But to do such a thing!" Nadine exclaimed. "Why, if we hadn't arranged the whole affair, it would be terrible of her!"

So we fell to laughing. Eventually we went via cab to the Owl Car, and when we finally arrived at the Kumquat, Cass was there to greet us. Nadine told her the story and

she was delighted, bless her black soul. I love people who are on my side.

It was all easy. Violet, seeing us the next day, tried to hide her embarrassment. She flew at me. "I did it on purpose, Randall Peters. You've been perfectly horrid lately. And I knew Nadine wouldn't care. She understands."

Drawing myself up nobly, I said I didn't blame her a bit, that Chaunce was a prince, that the best man had won.

Nadine, lowering her eyes, told Violet, "I'm glad you went with him, Violet, if you like him."

I paid Chaunce well—fifteen simoleons and all expenses, with the understanding that he must have a repeat date so she wouldn't catch on. But as a matter of fact I think he rather liked Violet, though he wouldn't spoil his story by admitting it. He had several dates with her.

So everybody was happy—and I? I was the happiest of all. For a while I was the gayest blade in Champion City. I kicked up my heels, I sang in the shower. I was my old youthful prewar self. But not for long.

RANDALL: *The Wooing of Nadine Wildraven*

THE SECOND TIME I SAW NADINE I CONCEIVED THE FIXation that I must marry her. Right away I began urging her to get a divorce. But here I met again with her steel-plated resistance. Moreover the kisses and soft embraces that she permitted me threw me into an agony of desire. I was beside myself, worse off than before. Perhaps I could have forced her—I don't know. Because she was an extremely human little female. But her "no" proved an insurmountable barrier. I was too soft with love to take her against her will.

About that time something happened that made a lot of difference in my courting. Shorty Metcalf turned up. He had been my lieutenant in New Guinea and was a hell-uva fine fellow. We'd seen a lot of action together. Shorty was a great officer. With his connections and his gall, I was surprised when he hit Champion City to find that he was only a captain. He had had malaria and his hair had turned completely gray from atabrine and the tropic sun. After I left New Guinea he caught some flak in his left arm and was finally shipped home. The arm was doing all right,

but he still had the three-day shakes as regularly as clockwork.

He and I ditched the rule against officers and non-coms fraternizing—and I might add, we got away with it. Holy Christ, what a feeling that was when I first saw him again! He sent for me at Headquarters with his idea of a joke and launched into a fruity dressing-down. I stood there with my mouth flopped open. Then we fell on each other's necks. Neither of us had ever expected to come out alive. Every dawning we thought, this'll be it—take your last look, pal! During those good days in Florida with Nadine we found ourselves every once in a while breaking off the talk and just staring at one another with a stupid grin, and that's what we were thinking.

Shorty approved of Nadine (but how could he not?) because he said she was quiet and undemanding, and a joy to look upon, and didn't jitter. Shorty and I babbled on and she listened—or appeared to be listening. Sometimes there was a faraway look in her eye, and I was jealous of that look. I knew it didn't concern me. When Shorty drove us places in his Chrysler, I sat with my arm around her, and she would settle herself comfortably against me, never resisting, though she wasn't mine and I knew it. She laughed at the right time and sometimes she put in a comfortable word. She was lovely and we loved her and were lost without her. But she wasn't really with us. In essence she was absent and wandering. The dreaming beauty whom my kiss could not arouse. When we were alone, I embraced her, I kissed her hair, I cupped my hands at her breast. She did not resist. But she was not there.

Shorty had an apartment at the Sun Arms and he gave me an extra key, so when he was in the hospital on his three-day shakes we could go in and make ourselves at home. It was in an ultra-modern U-shaped building with all units opening on the patio. A beastly lack of privacy, Shorty said—all our comings and goings could be checked by every eye in the place. But I can't say we let it deter us. Shorty liked to cook up messes and invite a bunch of victims in to eat it. Nadine dreaded those dinners. She rolled her eyes at me in distress and picked the food over, trying to find something she could recognize. I am from old conservative stock myself. I like my soup-to-nuts served in separate courses with dirty dishes taken off between acts. This business of tossing everything into one pot, burying it under medicinal herbs, with a splash of white wine and a soupçon of garlic, and gobbling it from one communal bowl with chopsticks—it's not for me. Shorty said women didn't know how to cook—nothing had any flavor. And after one of his messes, nothing ever did again. The taste buds were burned out, as with lye. I noticed that Shorty consumed rather large quantities of baking soda after every self-cooked meal. His sink was forever piled and running over, as dirty dishes assumed formidable proportions. I have in fact known Shorty to throw away pots, pans, et cetera, with a hey-nonny-nonny and start over from scratch.

I think the only reason he tolerated women at all at his self-styled feasts was in the wan hope that they'd clean up the kitchen. But they never did. Shorty had some dates

with Raydella Rose. He seemed to like them kind of old and tired. Raydella Rose was gruesome, he said—too thin, too dark, too walkie-talkie; like a horror movie, she gave him goose-pimples; but he enjoyed her. On one memorable occasion he led her into the kitchenette before the rusting, crusting pile, and said wistfully, "Do you want to do me a favor, honey——" But all he got was, "I'd rather pay for my supper some easier way. Let's just neck."

One time, to impress the girls, Shorty hauled out a big wooden box full of trophies from under his bed. Most of it was just a bunch of junk. Oh, he had several souvenir Japanese officers' pistols, and an Army .45, and there was one thing tossed on the heap that I liked—a little blue Colt in a velvet-lined case that had belonged to his father. Nadine proceeded at once to pick up the .45 and peer awkwardly down the barrel. It made a nervous wreck out of me. I took it away from her. "I hope it's not loaded," I said. "I like my girls with their heads still on."

"Takes a bullet as big as your thumb," Shorty said. "Knocks a man off his feet like a tenpin."

"Why do you need a big old gun like that, anyway?" Raydella Rose asked. "Can't you shoot just as well with a little one?"

Shorty and I looked at each other, stretched our hands helplessly, and shrugged. "It's a deadly war, old girl," Shorty said, laying on an English accent. "Lethal, and all that sort of thing. We shoot to kill!"

Well, enough about Shorty. Suffice to say I loved him like a brother and he was wonderfully good to me and my

girl. I tell about him because through him Nadine and I got to go places and do things, and without him there couldn't have been that Sunday. . . .

Shorty was in the hospital again. I think Nadine and I had moused around on Saturday night, rather aimlessly, and driven Shorty's car over to the View Vista club. And then on Sunday afternoon we went early to one of the decrepit movie houses with a box of popcorn to see a rerun of *Arsenic and Old Lace.* We were tired and a little hungover from the night before. We bought some drugstore sandwiches and potato salad and stuff and took it to Shorty's apartment, where we could relax. It was early, around three or four I guess. For a wonder the patio was deserted, not that I cared. I remember juggling groceries and struggling with the key and opening the door for Nadine. She smiled at me. "Why don't you let me help?" But I was stubborn and wouldn't. It seemed very wonderful as it always did to let my girl into an empty apartment with groceries on my arm as though we belonged there together. I put down the sack and dropped my cap and put my arms about her and said, "Marry me. Marry me. Marry me."

"Now don't start that again," Nadine said.

"I'm an old broken record," I said. "I am full of tunes but until that groove is chinked I can't get out of it. Marry me. Why don't you, Nadine? Am I so horrible?"

"You are not so very horrible. I am fond of you. Now let's make a drink, something tall, something cold. I do

hope Shorty filled his ice trays and has some limes. I think a rum collins would be nice, don't you?"

She always put me off like that. And I went docilely to mix the very best drink I could make for my girl. I wanted to do everything for her, wait on her hand and foot. I knew then what made guys get Sunday morning breakfasts for their wives and spend their last dollar on a bangle.

Well, we sat around that Sunday afternoon, and I begged her to divorce the missing husband and marry me, and I begged her to love me. I offered to spend my life trying to make her happy if she'd just give me the chance. With my arms around her, the whole dirty rotten war receded into nothingness. I adored her. We drank a number of rum collins that afternoon, one after the other, until we were comfortably potted. Not riotous, not noisy, just quiet and in rather a mild glow. Nadine had got so she could hold her liquor pretty well. When she did get drunk, she was very silent and sweet and it was hard to tell except for the brightness of her eyes and the flush in her cheeks. She played at smoking. After a couple of puffs she managed to forget her cigarette, letting it burn down in the tray with a curl of smoke going up beside her. I talked of love and marriage and kissed her until I had myself in a fine stew and perfect misery set in. She shook her head; she said, no, no, no; and I was in an agony of desire. I don't know why I was strictly honorable, except that she affected me that way.

I usually skirted the subject of her husband because it made her sulky, but that afternoon my jealousy got the best

of me. I said, angrily, "Christ! Why hang on to some bastard who walked out on you! He couldn't be anything but a rat! And not even a smart rat. What lured him off—a piece of cheese?"

Wow, did she get mad! She jumped to her feet, sparks flying. "How dare you say those things?" she said in a low shaky voice. "You don't know what you're talking about!" Her mouth quivered and tears splashed. "I was happy with Steve for thirteen years! Nothing you say can alter that. And I shall not divorce him, and I shall not marry you. So you may as well forget the whole thing!" She glared around the room. "I want to get out of here."

How easily the bubble bursts on one of those mild tapering-off drinking bouts! My burning desire for her smoldered and smothered itself, and I was conscious of defeat and frustration and a long low ache. "I'll take you home." I got up and picked up the glasses and ash trays and took them into the kitchen. Our bag of sandwiches sat untouched on the counter. I threw out the remaining cubes and filled the trays with water and stuck them back in the freezer, all in heavy silence now, bored and ugly. I went to help her with her new coral jacket, but she jerked it from me and drew it on herself. She picked up her purse. I secured my tie and fitted my cap to my head. I swung open the door—and lo! I closed it again.

"My God!" I said. "Mrs. Flugleman!"

"No!" Nadine went to the window and cautiously parted a slat of the venetian blind. And there she saw her, stretched out in a deck chair in the patio, an extraordinary

lump of hat pulled over her head, clackety-clack, sitting gossiping with the woman who managed the building.

"Oh, Randy!" cried Nadine. "I simply can't face her now. She'll say awful things if she sees us coming out of here together!"

I felt blasted. "That's not what worries me. She'll swarm all over us like a barrel of bacteria. I don't feel capable of brushing her off."

Nadine put down her jacket and her bag. "We'll just have to wait until she leaves." She drooped on the arm of a chair by the window and I leaned back against a table by the door, my arms folded. We were silent. My head buzzed.

"That damned rum," I said finally. "We ought to stick to whisky."

Nadine was peeking at Flugleman. "Look at that Buck Rogers hat!"

"Maybe she's traded her broom for a flying saucer."

And all at once we were laughing.

I went over to her. "I'm a pig. Please forgive me," I begged.

She shook her head. "I think it was all my fault."

I brought my hands together. "Well! We may as well conjure up another drink. This may be a long marathon."

So we were back again where we started, Nadine and I. And Flugleman remained true to the watch. I suppose we should have eaten and made some coffee, but we were addled and hung-over, and we sat on the sofa with our feet propped on the coffee table, sipping warm drinks since I'd

cleverly thrown away all the ice, and now and then one of us got up and peered through the slats. Inevitably I fell into the routine wherein I asked her why she wouldn't let me make love to her, and she evaded with silly replies such as that she was too old for me and it would only make matters worse. And Flugleman stayed on. Finally, when the late sun glowed red at the kitchenette window, Nadine went to the blind.

"She's still there," she said. But instead of sitting back on the sofa, she put down her drink and sat on my lap in sudden surrender. She put her arms around me and kissed me warm upon the mouth and buried her face in my neck.

"I'm sorry I'm so horrid," she said. "I don't mean to be, Randy. I like you very much. But I cannot marry you, Randy. I'm so sorry."

"You could let me love you. You could do that much. You could let me have you. Would that be so terrible? Would it hurt anything?"

"No. No it really wouldn't. It wouldn't matter at all."

"Well, why don't you then? I'm miserable, wretched. And I can't rape you. I'm not the type. I want you to want me."

No answer. Silence. A hot little face pressed into my neck.

"Please try, Nadine."

"I don't care, Randy! I just don't care . . ."

The sun plunged into the bay and a brief dusk slanted shadows across the room when I took my girl. Not in the warmth of helpless passion, not in ecstasy of romantic bliss, but wearily, out of her indifference and my long waiting;

a strained, forced, anticlimactic mating which left us incredibly sad. I could have wept over her, and she did cry weakly at my breast. I did not want to take my girl like that. Afterward I was glad it was over, because it broke the ice of her misgivings and released us both from our reserves, and there were times of happiness to come. But oh, the heaviness of our hearts that day—not regret, not remorse, nothing of that—but bleak sorrow and a lethargy of spirit, as from a wasteland.

CASSANDRA: *When April with Its Sweet Breath*

FOR EASTER STANLEY SENT ME A RESPECTABLE DOZEN AND a half yellow roses with a staid engraved card and "Greetings" written in ink. I lifted them one by one, ruthlessly shearing off the stems to fit a blue glass bowl; red roses from Randy to Nadine monopolized all the tall vases. Out of doors the grayish greens of winter had pulsed into vivid lushness. The Gleason sisters brought a leaning Madonna lily from Walgreen's and set it on the office counter to broadcast its sickly odor. Hobson came over, carrying a thirsty many-headed pink hydrangea.

Early on Sunday morning the lodge began to hum, feet padding, doors closing, water running, razors buzzing; all the stir of people up and getting ready for church. Randy, who reserved the roof room every week end now, appeared in the kitchen before eight o'clock. Nadine and he were driving to the Bok Tower with their friend Shorty. We celebrated breakfast with hard-boiled Easter eggs. Nadine and Randy, along with Delaney, Lucy, and some of their friends, had done the coloring one week night while I was out—also liberally dyeing counter, sink, and dish towels.

Masterpieces were on display in nests. We ate from a bowl of discarded streaked ones.

I returned from delivering to church those few of my guests who didn't have transportation, glad that seasonal visitors were only apt to be devout on this one day, and found Delaney and his friends in possession of my lobby. Delaney had asked for the holiday off. But what could I do? The desk traffic would be heavy, and after unceasing search and advertising I was still without a maid.

"Here comes the old Inn-keep," Delaney said, leaning on his elbow at the counter, voicing his disrespect. "Peepul come and peepul go and nozzing ever happens." I directed a vague smile toward his young friends; I was in a hurry, hoping to get the rooms made up before the guests came trooping back. Lucy was there, and two student actors from Singleton's rooming house, and Ann Mary—a young Italian girl whom they were currently much taken up with. She was a short, squarely built girl with a vivid face, who struck me from the first as unusually forthright and intelligent. I'd gone to their Little Theater plays, and certainly Ann Mary was a clever actress, easily the best of the season's lot.

I was so accustomed to the girls in sweaters and tight skirts and flat heels, and the boys in skimpy ribbed T-shirts and slacks, that they appeared almost unrecognizable in their spring finery. Lucy and Ann Mary ladylike in pastels and high heels, and the round adolescent heads of the boys thrusting incongruously from double-breasted gabardine and padded shoulders.

Delaney stopped me before I could get past. "Another

memento," he said, indicating with a wave of his hand a long florist's box upon the counter. I groaned. The young people gathered round as I snapped the string and lifted the lid. I pulled back the green waxed paper, disclosing the most worn-out, beaten-up feather duster I have ever seen. The tag on the handle read, "April Fool!" I looked at the youngsters. Every face wore the guilty grin of the practical joker. They burst into laughter. I glanced at the desk calendar. Sure enough—telling commentary on that bitter war year—Easter came on April Fool's Day.

I changed into housemaid's uniform, thinking that Delaney wasn't the only one—I'd like to have some time off myself. I came back through the lobby, and there, to my infinite chagrin, I lost my temper. Delaney was reading aloud from a book of love poems. The opus was, I believe, the *sine qua non* of the youthful intelligentsia of the moment. But I'd asked Delaney to please keep it out of the lobby. It was a beautifully designed volume, with sprigged flowerlets on the cover, prefaced by a series of testimonials to disarm the censor. They all agreed, these urbane and weighty elders who endorsed the book, that here was poetry of pure love at first blush, biological catharsis of high order, and "Whosoever Thought It a Dirty Book Reflected but the Low Order of His Own Mind." Delaney, entranced, evidently had never thought of women's breasts as musky melons before, or hairs as small ferns, or whatever else among the fruit and figment line the author had evoked. Delaney had told me, in all seriousness, that I might read it if I promised not to be shocked.

Now here was Delaney in one of his smart moods chanting at the top of his lungs a fruity passage on copulation. Lucy, Ann Mary, and the young men were draped in various poses at the counter and on chairs listening with unruffled absorption. I threw up my hands in a fit. Forsaking all tact, I laid them out.

"Delaney, I told you to keep that book out of here! I wish you kids would remember that my tourists are not as a rule students of erotic symbolism! To them, Casabas and plumy asparagus frond are strictly truck garden! If you want to explore the anatomy of sex, do it some place besides my lobby!"

I turned and stamped upstairs, but not before I saw their faces. Hot blood was showing in Delaney's cheeks. One of the boys studied the carpet; the other looked in embarrassment out of the window. Ann Mary's eyes widened, startled, and Lucy's mouth was quivering.

When I came back downstairs, Delaney's friends were gone. There followed a hectic afternoon, what with Delaney sulking and me trying to maintain a festive egg-rolling atmosphere for the guests. In the evening I folded early. I put on a double portion of hormone wrinkle cream and went to bed. The last thing I thought before I fell asleep, I wished I hadn't scolded those kids.

I roused at four o'clock in the morning, dimly aware of a pounding at the back door. I stumbled out and snapped on the porch light. Lucy and Ann Mary were there. The nice dresses were torn, Lucy's face was streaked with dirt and

tears, and Ann Mary's left arm hung queerly at her side. I let them in, led them into my room in a daze of sleep, and sank blinking on the edge of the bed, trying to make out what it was all about.

"Now start again," I said. "Just one of you talk at a time . . ." I rubbed my forehead to wake up my fuzzy brain, putting in questions, fitting the thing together. . . .

Delaney had gone off the desk at nine-thirty and walked across town to the Flamingo where Lucy and Ann Mary waited for him. Almost every night some of the gang met over there, sitting at wooden tables under the open sky, a halo of bugs around the lights, eating cheeseburgers and drinking milk-shakes. Usually they had fun but tonight none of the other kids were there, and for some reason the place was gloomy.

On the way home they had taken a diagonal short-cut, along lonely Frijoles Boulevard. The night was warm and overcast. The street was deserted, with lights only at intersections, a few new houses blocks apart, long wastes of sand and vacant overgrown lots. Their footsteps fell hollowly on the new sidewalk. The palmettos rustled. There was no traffic.

Just as they were crossing under an intersection light, a cruising car full of soldiers came along. They were drunk. One of them leaned out, yelling, "Look at that bastard of a civilian with two women!" The car slowed almost to a stop. Lucy was frightened, but Ann Mary wasn't at first. She felt indignant. Delaney didn't so much as turn his head, and the three of them walked on in silence. The car

cruised along the curb, the soldiers bawling obscenities at them.

"Betcha the son of a bitch is 4-F."

"That's what we're fighting for! So the 4-F's can stay home and screw the women!"

They began yelling. "Come on, you dames! Get in the car. Let that pansy alone." Lucy began to shiver. But the three of them kept on silently, the car still following. There were no other cars in sight, nowhere to turn in, no house, only vacant lots. They were coming to a place where an old tree spread its looming shadow—a fantastic tree with long thick rubbery leaves encompassed about with a labyrinth of root trunks, some of them a foot thick, forming archways and openings, weird and dark. By night it was a tree to make the blood run cold.

Ann Mary whirled suddenly and cried out in rage. "Why don't you get along, you stupid drunks!"

As though this were a signal, the car stopped, and five soldiers poured over the side. The girls started to run, but they couldn't go fast because of their high heels. One of the soldiers caught Ann Mary, grabbing her by the arm, twisting it, driving the breath from her in a shriek of pain. Two soldiers held Lucy. The other two beat the dimly struggling Delaney. Lucy saw them knock him down and kick him in the groin. She began to scream and one of the soldiers hit her to make her shut up. She scratched and kicked, but they hauled her into the back seat. The soldier who held Ann Mary was hurting her arm so that she could not fight. He wrenched her into the car. She fell to her knees on the floor almost fainting with pain. The soldier released

her. Sick at her stomach, she nursed her arm. The two soldiers who had beaten Delaney got into the front seat and the car started up.

Lucy and Ann Mary didn't know just what all happened after that. Ann Mary could hear herself talking, talking, in a querulous hysterical voice. She didn't know what she said, but she was conscious of a wild scuffling of arms and legs beside her. Lucy began to sob and plead, "Please don't . . . Please . . . Please let me go . . ."

Ann Mary screeched, "Don't beg them, Lucy! That's what they want!" And she screamed at the men who had Lucy, "Let her alone! You fools! You dirty fools!"

The soldier who was passenger in front shouted, "God damn it, fellas! Stop the car!" The car slowed and the driver called, "We better let 'em go." Then both girls heard the frenzied yell: "Jeep! Jeep! Jeep!"

"Get 'em down. Get 'em down!"

The girls were hurled to the floor, feet and knees pressing hard upon them, too stunned to know enough to scream as a spotlight raked across the car. The soldiers were queerly silent. The car drove casually on. Ann Mary could hear her own struggle for breath and Lucy's shuddering gasps. The car leaped forward under them and veered sharply. The soldiers stirred into frantic activity.

"Jesus! The MP's!"

"Christ Almighty!"

"Step on it!"

Then the car lurched and stopped. Soldiers jumped and pulled Lucy free. But the one grappling Ann Mary

growled, "Naw, I don't get rid of this one. When I give her what's comin' to her she'll wish she was dead!" The other soldiers tore at her to get her loose. "Come on, goon!" "Let her go, you simple bastard!" Ann Mary was dragged free and thrown. Lucy lay sprawled upon the ground, sobbing bitterly. Some remnant of anger drew Ann Mary to her knees to stare after the carful of soldiers as it careened, driving away. . . .

I was up and in my housecoat when the girls finished their story. I'd fashioned a sling from a towel for Ann Mary's arm, and washed Lucy's face.

"Oh," I moaned, wanting to crawl back into bed, pull covers over my head, and deny this nightmare. "Such a beastly thing! Are you girls sure you're not badly hurt?"

"We walked all the way home," Ann Mary said. "We're just dead tired."

"We can't find Delaney!" wailed Lucy.

"We were lost," Ann Mary explained. "And Lucy was crying so hard. Finally we came to the tree where Delaney was beaten. There was some blood. But he's gone."

"We'll check the hospital and the police," I said, noticing daylight at the window. "No—wait a minute." I fished the master key from my desk. "Let's look in his room first."

"He won't be there!" Lucy exclaimed. "He's probably hunting us—if he isn't dead!"

But she went along with us up the stairs. I knocked. There was no sound. I inserted the key and opened the

door. Delaney lay in his clothes on top of the bed, his face turned toward the wall. I went over and examined him. His mouth was cut and his face was getting puffy. He huddled, his hands pressed to his thighs. He turned his face into his pillow.

"Get out," he said in muffled fury. "Get out!"

NADINE: *The Imprint*

I HAD MADE A BARGAIN WITH MYSELF. I SAID WHEN the north winds stop blowing I'll stop thinking of Steve. Randy was restless and irritable, pressing me hard for my promise to marry him. I was with him constantly and yet I felt untouched by him. It was wrong to keep him dangling. I said, when spring comes surely I'll turn alive to Randy. A dozen times a day I looked at the strange soft hands of a woman who didn't do housework any more, examining the white band on my third finger where the wedding ring had been. Only lately at Randy's insistence I'd taken it off. But when would the imprint wear away? Deep inside me, the wound that was Steve throbbed and ached. Time had poured over it all the days of the winter, but I could not let it alone. I must probe it and watch the poisons bubble. I had culled my memory for patches of my life with Steve and pieced and fitted and studied until they flowed like a ribbon.

It all began long ago in a little college town in Ohio, back in 1930 when I was seventeen. My parents died when I was a child and I lived around with aunts while I went through school. Sometimes I felt none too welcome. I

clerked after school and on Saturdays, and I saved money for a beauty operator's course. I don't know what I thought about before I met Steve. It must have been something, but I don't remember what. I was totally unformed in mind and habits. Steve teased me at first and called me Galatea and I didn't know what he meant.

I guess my school life wasn't very normal. I can't remember ever paying attention to the college kids. They belonged to another world. Some of the high-school girls dated college boys, but I never had dates—I wasn't allowed to. And then I was strange, I suppose, conscious that my home life was different from other girls', and I had so few clothes. I liked boys, but I was afraid of them. One evening as I came out of beauty school, a tall blonde girl whose name was Lily Stoner came up to me and said, "Nadine, you've got to help me out. I'm meeting a couple of college boys and I have to bring along another girl."

I refused for a long time, but she kept overriding me. She said I wouldn't be expected to talk or anything. I suppose the real reason I went was that I didn't want to go home. We were meeting them at a restaurant where college kids hung out. I'd never been inside the place and I was nervous. Somehow when we came in I brushed against the counter and knocked off a cardboard standard —one of those Turkish ladies, advertising cigars. I leaned over to pick it up, and at the same time a fellow who was buying pipe tobacco there leaned over to get it too, and we bumped our heads. The blow made me dizzy and as we straightened up he grabbed me by the arms to steady me.

He was laughing, but I don't know whether I was laughing or not, because it was Steve. I stared at him. He was stocky with broad shoulders. He had brown hair and eyes, dark like mine. He wore some kind of loose short coat, with gray flannel trousers and a red sweater. His hat was pushed back on his head. I noticed his mouth, the firm full sweet curve of his lips. My knees began to shake.

He asked if he had hurt me and I said no, though my head felt as if it were cracked wide open. Lily turned to see what had become of me. She came back and jerked my arm. "Come on, Nadine! He's that stuck-up Steve Wildraven! Don't pay any attention to him!" And somehow I knew, from the tone of her voice and the way she tossed her head, that it wasn't just an insult. She was baiting him, hoping for a rise. He ignored her completely. "Can't I get you a coke or something?" he asked me, and I mumbled that I had a date. I remember he looked disappointed.

Lily dragged me along with her and introduced me to a couple of boys at a table. I didn't notice what they looked like or what their names were or anything. I saw Steve move from the tobacco stand to the fountain. He ordered a coke and stood there leaning on one elbow drinking it. We kept glancing at each other and sometimes our eyes met. Lily and the two boys at the table poked fun at me because I was so tongue-tied. They ate sandwiches, but I was too self-conscious—I just had a phosphate. I hated them, and I hated Lily for trapping me there, and I couldn't swallow for the man standing at the fountain. He watched us as we got up to leave and my knees would hardly carry

me past him toward the door. We stopped at the cash register while the boys paid the check, then abruptly there at my elbow was Steve! He looked very resolute.

He asked, "Do you really want to go with those guys?" I shook my head. He turned and said belligerently, "Sorry, fellas! This is my girl—she's not going with you!" He looked cocky, and I think Lily and the boys were taken by surprise.

"You got a lotta crust!" one of the boys said. And the other moved up to Steve, saying, "You dirty chiseler. I oughta knock your block off."

Steve stood with his feet braced, sneering. "Any time you think you can do it!"

The boy nervously licked his lip. Lily pulled at him. "Let's go! Good riddance!"

"You won't get away with this," the boy muttered with a black look over his shoulder. But the three of them went on out the door, buzzing indignantly. Steve smiled as he took my arm. I was so terrified and helpless that he almost had to carry me back to a table. We sat down and I had another phosphate. I'd never seen boys in a real fight. I didn't realize it had all been a fizzle, and that the reason was they didn't care enough about me to go on with it.

"What'll they do?" I said.

Steve answered with great masculine airiness, "If they ever catch me they'll probably beat me to a pulp!" And I was dumb enough to worry about it for a long time.

I was so in love that all day long and all night long I couldn't think of another thing but him. From his first kiss

he could do anything with me he wanted. I was putty. I couldn't resist him any more than the rose the bee or the sea the wind. He could have made me pregnant or anything. But he was careful of me.

"I hate this sneaking around!" he said vehemently. "And I'm not going to stand for it!"

We eloped to Kentucky. It poured down rain. Our funny old honeymoon hotel had a leaky roof. How we laughed as the water came splashing in! Steve was exultantly happy —as though he'd conquered Asia, instead of a green girl he already owned. I don't know what he ever saw in me. We found a cheap furnished flat and set up secret housekeeping, terribly lost in love. "We'll work out something this summer," he said, and I could begin to sense the worry in him.

It wasn't ten days before we were found out. I heard footsteps coming up the rickety flight of stairs one afternoon. I didn't suppose it was Steve. He always took those steps running, and besides he should have been in class. I was dusting. He came quietly in and I jumped when I saw him standing there. His face had a funny vacant look.

"I've been expelled," he announced. He went over and sat down on the wooden settee, his hat pushed on the very back of his head, gnawing at a hangnail. "I'm going to find out about the city colleges," he said, biting nervously at his finger tip. "There must be some place I can get my degree even if I *am* married!" He stood up and took off his hat and short coat and hung them in he closet. "They won't even let me have my credits!" he exploded, whirling

around. "What right have they got to keep those I've already earned? Even if I have broken some stupid college rule!"

I stood watching him with the dust cloth in my hand. He walked over to the rusty hot-water radiator, felt it and kicked it for heat. Suddenly he whirled again, his face dark, the bitter anger bursting from him. "It's all right to go sleeping around in cars and bushes, catch as catch can! But lawful cohabitation in bed with the wife you love is strictly forbidden!"

His parents came at once, notified by the college. We had both thought the old flat was funny and gay, with ancient light fixtures and flimsy oak furniture and dingy red wallpaper. We spread around my dishes and bric-a-brac and Steve's books and pictures. But on that day when his parents came, and his mother seated herself gingerly on the settee, glancing with cold eyes at the rocking chairs and the broken grate, I saw how shoddy and dark and ugly it was. She kept her coat on, and Steve's father clutched his hat as though they'd interrupted some liaison.

Steve was their model son. He was their only child, born of their middle years. He must mind his manners for his mother. He must be a credit to his father. But he could keep his troubles and his failures to himself. Up until the time he married me, he had easily fulfilled his dual role, living his real life apart, hiding his weaknesses and his sins. When I first met him, I swear he was no more used to being loved than I was.

I sat facing his mother on that dreadful day, across a

hideous curlicue of faded carpet, rigid with humiliation. Steve's father stood beside her, with Steve placing himself warily half in front of me, as though we had chosen up sides. His mother said something—I suppose her heart was breaking, but I didn't think of that then—something to Steve about "sacrificing your career and all our great plans, for this—this young person." And she drew back her head and looked at me with loathing, as though I weren't alive or possessed of feeling, just some tawdry thing that came with the flat.

Steve said furiously, not only contradicting her—maybe for the first time in his life—but laying down a law. "Be careful what you say, Mother! Don't you ever criticize my wife!" And his mother, who was tall and dark with a beautiful sharp nose, recoiled, shock upon her face.

His father, who was plump and stocky, began to pace up and down the curlicue in the carpet. His expensive tan shoes shone like satin. I guess there must have been some buried antagonism between the two men. I think it leaped alive that day when Steve showed his real self for the first time. His father said, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "Now that you think you're such a man and have yourself married and kicked out of college—what do you plan to do for a living? I certainly have no intention of supporting your so-called wife!"

Steve's face went quite white. He didn't move, but I saw a kind of quiver pass over him. His voice came out queer and thin. "I'll support my wife. Don't worry! I've fought my own battles! What did you ever do for me except shell out money? I guess I can do without that too."

Steve hadn't warned me that he expected trouble with his parents. But I knew then that he'd anticipated them and was ready for the fight. His mother didn't address a single word to me, or even look to acknowledge my existence when she left. His father clapped his hat on his head before he got to the door.

"If you ever come to your senses," he said, "you can see me in my office."

"Don't hold your breath," Steve said. He didn't show them out. He waited there by me, staring coldly. I sat with my head bowed, my hands clenched. I'd never dreamed that I would bring him harm! I wanted to die. Steve knelt beside me, kissing my hands, begging me not to mind.

"Everything will be all right! You'll see."

"But look what I've done to you. I've ruined your life."

"No. You're the choice I've made, don't you understand?" And I have never forgotten, young as he was then, how manly he seemed. He stood up and pulled me with him. He lifted my chin in his hand. "Hold up your head, kitten! Be proud."

We went to Cleveland. Steve thought maybe he could go to night school there. But as it turned out he never got the first chance. The Depression was settling in deep. Plants were closed and streets were flooded with men out of work. Steve had no experience, didn't know how to do anything. The only job he could find was as bus boy in a greasy cafeteria. I felt sick for him. I wanted to look for work too, in a beauty parlor or clerking, but Steve wouldn't let me. It was as though he'd set himself a test, because of the things

his father said. I think his parents waited for him to come crawling to them, and maybe finally came to hope and pray that he would, but he seemed to have dismissed them from mind. He never mentioned them.

I was so dumb I didn't realize how precariously we were living. I'd never had anything of my own before, I guess that's why. And Steve babied me, hiding his worries away. The first time I saw him break down I was astonished. We'd been married over a year. We saw some red slippers in Halle's window—Frenchy-looking, satin, with pompoms and squatty heels. Steve and I were standing in the gray canyon of downtown Cleveland, window-shopping on a Sunday afternoon.

"You like those?" Steve asked. He had his hand in his pocket idly clinking some coins.

"Yes! Aren't they darling!"

"They're all right," Steve said indifferently.

But not long afterward, when I was going through Steve's shirts, I found an envelope at the bottom of the drawer. It was marked in pencil: "Snooper Stay Out!" In it were dollar bills and some change. And I knew at once that Steve was saving money to buy me those slippers. I had some old worn-out oxfords that I clopped around in when I was ready for bed—and oh, how Steve hated those shoes! Men are so funny. I put the money back, deciding to say nothing. But we needed a lot of things worse than an expensive pair of bedroom slippers.

We were living in one furnished room. I cooked on a gas plate and we ate on an oilcloth-covered table. In the corner stood a molting overstuffed chair and a lamp with a paper

shade. The old bed at the opposite end of the room sagged in the middle. Every morning Steve and I woke up tossed into a helpless heap. Steve's pictures and books, and the dishes that had belonged to my mother, were long since gone for whatever bits of money they would bring. Steve was working in a foundry—a long ride out on the streetcar, but the best job he'd landed yet. He'd taken any old thing he could get for as long as it lasted, from shoveling snow in the streets to clerking in a rancid basement shoe store.

All day I thought of the hidden slipper money, smiling to myself. And that night I remember I fixed lamb patties with bacon strips around them for our dinner. They came already made up at the butcher shop, cheap as hamburger, but Steve loved bacon. He was late getting home and I watched the meat, getting madder every minute as it shrank and hardened and the bacon frizzled itself away. When he came in he had his coat collar turned up, his work cap pulled down to his eyes.

"Where have you been?"

"I walked part way."

"What in the world for?"

"I just felt like walking."

He handed me the pay envelope out of his pocket. I knew without looking that a lay-off notice was inside. He ate his dried-out dinner, saying once, "I'll find another job. Don't worry."

I was used to Steve by then—used to how he acted when things went wrong, growing more silent and determined, never giving in. But that night, getting ready for bed, I

put on my nightgown and stuck my feet into the hideous battered oxfords. Steve had just taken off his tie and was unbuttoning his shirt. All at once he came at me across the room and jerked the shoes away. He threw them with all his might against the wall. He swept me up and stood there holding me like a child in my bare feet. His face contorted and terrible sounds rumbled up out of his chest and he began to cry. I didn't know how to stop him. He wouldn't put me down. His tears dropped cold upon my breast. . . .

Why would he feel so bad over a little thing like slippers that he never got to buy? I never saw him cry about anything else. Except long ago, when he first made love to me—before he learned to control his wildness, he used to hurt me. Afterward he sobbed. I had to comfort him. "You couldn't help it, Steve. Don't feel bad!"

Hard times don't just last for a year or two; they go on and on. But one day when Steve was twenty-six and I was twenty-two and we were well weathered by the Depression, Steve got a job in an office—clerical work that paid twenty-five dollars a week! We were rich. We moved into a two-room kitchenette apartment and bought furniture on the installment plan. And now that our luck had turned, circumstances changed fast. Steve's company opened a new plant in Claybourn, Ohio, and Steve had a chance to transfer.

He came home at six o'clock and walked into the kitchenette. I was stirring gravy for roast beef and yorkshire pudding. He ran his finger up and down the back of my

neck and said, very casually, "How would you like to live in a small town? Maybe have a house and yard?"

I put down the gravy spoon, turned, and lifted my arms around his neck. "I like it here," I said, thinking he was joking, "where it's dark and smoky and we can hear streetcars all night." And I looked at his firm sweet mouth and I reached up and kissed him.

"I've got a new job in Claybourn, Ohio."

"Well, can't you take off your hat and stay a minute?" Then I saw the excitement in his face and pushed him back. "You mean you really do have a new job? Away from Cleveland!"

He went into the living room for a map out of the desk drawer to show me where Claybourn was, and I followed him and let the gravy bubble and scorch and burn. But I said a stupid thing. I said, "I thought you meant to start in night school and get your degree!"

He put down the map, scowling. He said in a cold harsh voice, "I'm too old now. I haven't time. I'm going to grab this chance fast and get us out of the slums!"

How swiftly then the good years rolled by. I loved Claybourn. It was like coming home. We bought our house and a car, and made friends, and Steve brought me a cat. It rubbed against my legs while I cooked and sat in Steve's lap when he read. Life branched out until all the ugly poor part of the dirty city faded almost from memory. The boyishness and brashness and conceit had long since been knocked out of Steve. He worked hard, he was very serious, he got ahead. He worked his way through several depart-

ments. Finally he was put in charge of personnel. He was quiet. He never seemed to take much pleasure in his promotions. He didn't talk often about the office, seemed to want to forget it when he was home. He'd taken to reading more and more. He'd go in his study and close the door. Or he'd slip out of the house at night and go for a walk. Sometimes I'd get to imagining what Steve's babies would be like, and I wanted them terribly. I'd plant myself on Steve's lap and pester him. But he never gave in. He'd say we couldn't afford children. Or "Some day," he'd say. "Maybe."

I don't know why he didn't talk over things with me. Sometimes I think it wasn't my fault; it was the way he grew up and he never broke the habit. But I was so contented myself, I didn't realize what a disappointed man he was. When the draft came, I was beside myself. I didn't see how I'd ever live a day without him. Steve had been brooding over the war for a long time. He was very restless. "God!" he would say, "I don't see how I'll ever be able to be a soldier! I don't think I've got it in me." I said, "Surely you won't have to go at your age!" "I don't know. But maybe a man ought to go anyway." By the time his notice came, I was hysterical. But he was quiet, too quiet. He took his preliminary physical, went through the days that followed almost gayly, as though he were relieved it had come at last. He treated my tears casually, preoccupied with something deep down in his brain. I thought surely he would make love to me that last night. He lay awake a long time with his arms under his head. He answered my many questions perfunctorily, patiently, until I was quiet.

And I, fool that I was, thought he was just holding himself in to keep from breaking.

He left on a bus and he would not let me come to see him off. He kissed me very gently, and he looked happy. I didn't know whether I would ever see him again. I cried for two days. A printed form came from the War Department. It directed me not to attempt to reach him until I had word of destination. I sank down on the hall steps moaning. The town clock was striking ten. I felt slovenly to be still in my housecoat so late in the morning, but what was there to dress for? And then the front door opened—and Steve walked in! I thought I was surely seeing things. His hair was clipped and he had on a stiff, ill-fitting private's uniform. His face bore a greenish tinge from the typhus shots. I held out the card helplessly, blinking up at him from the steps. He glanced at it and laughed. He had a twenty-four-hour furlough, he said. He made no move to take me in his arms.

He was half sick and very tired and he went straight to bed, stretching between the smooth sheets without pajamas. All day long he slept. I wandered absently, softly, about the house, now and then coming in to look at him. He slept so hard that he scarcely stirred, and I bent to see if he was breathing. He looked dead, pale-green dead.

I had a good dinner. I worked all afternoon fixing things he liked. But neither of us ate much. Steve had put on the shirt and trousers of his uniform. I couldn't get used to the pale band around his head where the hair was clipped. I'd gotten myself all dressed up, in black velvet with a full

skirt, so he'd think I looked pretty. We sat by the cold fireplace after dinner.

He said in a very quiet voice, "You've been the only good thing in my life. I guess you know I've loved you."

I felt too desolated to cry. I thought he was making farewells.

"I hate my existence," he went on. "I hate the compromises I've made. I've never done any of the things I planned. I've despised the jobs I've held. Anyone with a quarter of a brain could have done them." His nervous manner and bitter voice made me think he was feverish. "I've tried to come down. God knows, I've tried to conform, accept my own level. Millions of small potatoes feel the same way, I know that. Now here I am—thirty-six years old, a private in the United States Army! I don't even know if I can do it, but I'm going to try."

He stood up, leaned against the mantel, running his hand absently over his eyes. He looked at me then, his face hard and cold. "I'm never coming back, Nadine," he said quietly. "Never."

I was horrified. "Don't say that, Steve!" I thought he meant he'd be killed.

He turned away as if he hadn't heard me. "I could take it a day at a time—that's all that's held me together. A chain of days. But I can never come back to it."

I said sharply, "Steve! What are you talking about?"

He looked at me curiously. He asked, "Can't you see I'm all washed up? Haven't you known it for a long time?"

I was filled with terror. He looked so awful, so drawn

and peaked, with his queer hair and stiff clothes and pale green skin. I thought, "He's out of his head!" and I wondered if I should call a doctor. He sat down in the wing chair facing me again, throwing himself back wearily. He said that when the war was done, if he came out alive, he didn't know where he would go. "But the point is," he said, "I don't care. I consider myself a failure." I couldn't think then what his voice and manner reminded me of—but it was as though he were talking about someone who was dead!

He said, "I want you to try and make a new life for yourself. I know I'm doing a terrible thing to you. But we'd be separated anyway, probably for years. You'd have a bad adjustment either way."

"Steve——" I cried, sitting panicky on the edge of the chair, yet still rather humoring him, believing he was sick or crazy. "If you really mean you don't want to come back here, I'll go with you anywhere, do anything——"

He lost patience with me then. "I'm through!" he said furiously. "I don't want you waiting for me. I've got to be free!"

He talked and talked. He told me to sell everything and keep the money. He would take care of me while he was in the army with an allotment and whatever other payments he could manage. That was his moral and legal obligation, he said, and one he accepted gladly.

It didn't make any sense. My mind wandered. I stared at the dusty huckleberry leaves in the cold fireplace, thinking I must throw them out. I had put off the fall cleaning, not wanting the house torn up for Steve's last weeks at

home. I think my body knew what was happening before I knew. I became aware that I was cramped and uncomfortable, sitting hunched on the edge of my chair, twisting my hands, my head hanging. My posture, the way I was huddling and all, reminded me for the first time in years of the day so long ago when Steve's father and mother had said their scornful things to my face as though I were inanimate, without feelings—a cheap statue or an umbrella stand. I thrust back in the seat then, lifted my head, and laid my hands on the arms of the chair.

Steve stopped talking and looked at me. In a detached voice, as though he were appraising me, he said, "I don't suppose it will be long, a girl like you, before you'll be married again."

That was when I think I knew. A clammy chill shook my spine. I got up and left the room, went to the bathroom, closed the door. I clung to a towel rack, shaking all over. I looked at myself in the mirror. "What's he talking about?" I whispered. "What's he talking about?" A white face with enormous idiot eyes stared back at me. I drank some water. I returned to the living room and sat down in my chair.

Steve was standing at the darkened bay window. He turned to face me. "The furniture and rugs and kitchen stuff will bring good prices with all the shortages," he said. I looked slowly around my living room. "Sell everything!" Steve said. I reached out, running my fingers along the creamy smoothness of the cherry table.

It seemed a long time ago. And now the north winds

had stopped blowing. It was warm every day. Champion City was so vivid with spring that it dazzled my eyes. Cass caught me brooding by the kitchen window and looked at me pityingly. She said, "Can't you possibly play it Randy's way? You know I'm sold on him."

I put my hands at my neck and pressed my throat. "I can't, Cass! I can't just yet. I still feel that Steve is my husband. I still want to go back!"

CASSANDRA: *The Colonel and Mrs. Flugleman*

BLARE OF TRUMPETS AND RUFFLE OF DRUMS—A MAID came! She was a clean, starched, young Negro girl, tall, thin, adenoidal. Imogene was her beautiful name. I dissolved almost into tears when she said she wanted to work. Fried pork chops and hominy grits were planned for her lunch, and Nadine baked a gooey pecan pie. Delaney kept the record player rocking. I gave her my green slack suit (it was too tight for me anyway) and my last drop of Shalimar.

"What's this, Miss Caz'?"

"That's Shalimar."

"My favorite kind of perfume!"

"Well, you take it, Imogene."

But she wouldn't clean the toilets. "It ain't sanitary, Miz Caz'. A person can get bad diseases off those places. I heard that."

"According to what you hear," I countered, "you can get bad diseases off streetcar straps too!"

"Well, I ain't never been on a streetcar in my whole life."

The weather turned abruptly hot and humid that day. I tried to believe, as I sweated great gumdrops, that this was the beginning of a long association with a transformed Imogene. So far she wasn't doing too well. I had the feeling she'd never come back when she took her pay. A forty-dollar slack suit, three dollars' worth of Shalimar, a dollar-and-a-half lunch, a concert, and two dollars cash money for her beginner's pains—not a bad day's relaxation. I wouldn't have thought of that kind of bribery before the war, but being slave to ten toilets had made me craven.

All in all, what with entertaining Miss Imogene, making the beds over after her, and showing her which end of the broom to hold, and the weather turning suddenly warm, I was exhausted. I crawled into the shower and was only saved from drowning myself by Nadine's hopeful words, "I'll make us a rum collins, Cassie!"

During the war was the only time I ever drank rum as a steady thing. Hobson Hawes of course could have gotten me all the whisky I wanted. But I didn't ask him for liquor, and what I did ask for was precious little else. Once in a while a girl from the corn belt like me just had to have a sirloin!

Nadine began mixing our drinks, tall and gorgeous and frosty with ice. We found a beautiful smooth light golden rum—expensive, of course—and we used fresh lemon and lime juice half and half. As she put the bottle away, there came a rapping and a tapping at our apartment door. It was the Lieutenant Colonel who was staying with us, recently returned from the Solomons. We'd seen very little of him. He left early in the morning, came back usually for a

short while in the evening, and went out again; just another transient as far as we were concerned.

Quoth the Colonel, "Can you girls sell me a bottle of whisky? I'm all out and I need a drink the worst way. This heat's killing me."

"We don't have whisky," Nadine said. "We've got rum." The Colonel uttered a horrified ejaculation. "Oh, but it's good!" Nadine insisted.

I overheard, skipping in my terry robe from bath to bedroom. "Invite him to have a drink with us," I called out.

The Colonel came into the kitchen while Nadine put together another collins. They weren't good out of a pitcher, they had to be individually built. The Colonel left the living-room door open, and Nadine overlooked closing it after him. Once my bath and body powdering's done, ten minutes will finish me. I came out in a fresh gray chambray and red sandals, makeup aglow, no Shalimar, but a brisk swish of cologne, and decided I might live. But during that fatal ten minutes Guess Who had taken possession of the open doorway? Nadine handed me my beautiful icy drink. I turned, leading the way, into the living room, and there before me—her chair ostensibly still in the lobby, but pulled over upon my very threshold—sat Mrs. Flugleman. She appeared bright and expectant and very much interested in our activities.

"Wait!" I said. "Let's sit in the kitchen. I want to enjoy my drink in peace."

The Colonel looked big and crumpled and sweaty huddled in the warm room. He tossed off his collins like an

ounce of red liquor in the gold rush. My own drink tasted delicious, but the minute it was gone an awful sleepiness settled upon me. I looked at the clock, stifling a terrific yawn. "Oh dear," I said. "Delaney's off this evening and I must go out and stay by the desk." The Colonel looked disappointed.

"We can have seconds in there," I said recklessly, thinking another drink might pick me up. "The lobby's much cooler, and maybe Flugleman will leave." That was a silly supposition if I ever spoke one, but my mind didn't seem to be tracking just right.

Nadine and I collaborated on refills, and when within a few minutes the three of us came trooping through, Flugleman moved agilely from her chair letting us pass. "I didn't realize I was blocking the doorway," she lied sweetly, batting her eyes at the Colonel.

Delaney had already gone. With considerable effort I asked Mrs. Flugleman if she wanted a drink. Furnishing her with liquor irked me. She was too cheap ever to buy it herself. But just let the cork pop on the house and there she was, shaking out her cocktail napkin.

"I'm not much of a drinkah! Make it a light one!" She went off into peals of gay laughter for the benefit of the Colonel.

"You needn't drink any," Nadine said over-innocently, "if you don't wish."

"Oh, I'd like just a small glassful. It would be very refreshing"—followed by another girlish gale.

The Colonel dropped into a chair. He was not very entrancing, poor fellow. Big, bordering on the burly, with

curly hair which had a limp way of falling down over his forehead, there was something unsavory and ridiculous about him. His uniform needed pressing. His shirt was not fresh.

After we fixed Flugleman up with her half a drink, we began acting like three women and one man. We peppered him with questions, and as he received the barrage of flattering attention he sat up and began to look alive. The drinks vanished. The Kumquat May was quiet; the evening stretched ahead of me interminably. I went out and mixed another batch. We learned over the third drink that here at last was the mythical man! The Colonel hadn't seen a white woman for nearly two years! One thing could be said now and forever for male and female living together in the same world: they clean each other up.

When he first hit San Francisco, he told us, it was a great wonder he wasn't arrested. He found himself on the street staring after women. Yes, he'd been out with girls since he came back, but always in a group. He wouldn't trust himself alone with just one—afraid he might go wild and tear her limb from limb. And sure enough the Colonel was getting mighty nervous being there with just the three of us! I wondered if I should round up Violet and Corsie and Raydella Rose for security. He changed his chair every other minute, sat beside one of us and then the other, and abruptly moved away, loosening the knot of his tie, beads of sweat banding his forehead.

He continued to drink like a tank. *Glug*, and it was gone! Then he'd sit eyeing his glass thirstily until we caught up with him. "I'm not used to mixed drinks," he

said. He followed Nadine into the kitchen when she took her turn at mixing the next lot. It was then that she received the first proposition of the evening. He caught her up in a big sweaty bear hug.

"You're adorable! I can't keep my hands off you."

Nadine moved her head agilely from side to side to escape his salty smooches, pushing away from the soft bulwark of his midriff with all her strength. "You let me alone," she said. "I don't like you. What makes you act this way?"

The Colonel was crushed. He stepped back abject with apology. "I lose my head. Come to my room later! I just gotta hold you in my arms."

"No! You get out of here or I'll hit you with this ice crusher!" Woefully the Lieutenant Colonel from the Solomons came trotting back to Mrs. Flugleman and me. From his dejected mien I knew he had met with repulse. But on his fourth drink he perked up again. He had his jacket unbuttoned and now he took it off. "I can't stand it," he said. "This heat!" The sweat trickled down his temples, a strand of hair dripped on his forehead, and dark moons widened at the underarms of his shirt. He mopped his face with a crumpled handkerchief. "I can't get used to clothes," he said wretchedly. "Went without a shirt most of the time in the Solomons."

Mrs. Flugleman's half drinks were beginning to tell. "Why not take your shirt off now, Colonel?" she cooed. "We women have all been married. We don't mind!" She patted the sofa invitingly beside her. "Come make yourself comfortable."

"So afraid of offending," he said. "But I will if you're sure it's all right. I'm in an agony." And off he bounded for his bedroom. Too modest, I guess, to remove his shirt in the presence of women, but not, alas, too modest to return without it. If I'd had my wits I would have protested. I couldn't have men disrobing in my lobby, after all. Instead, I sat there appalled. At best, a man in his undershirt leaves me uninspired. And this undershirt was grayish and unlaundered, with a runner squarely in the middle, a tuft of hairy chest peeping through. The flesh hung loose from his shoulders, and—most revolting to me—his underarms were not shaved. His belt was drawn too low and tight about the belly, dividing yeasty rolls.

I escaped from the sight of this monstrosity to the kitchen, discovering distractedly that we were out of lemons and limes. My head ached. I felt let down and utterly exhausted. Turning out the light in my living room, I closed the door part way and lay down on the studio couch there, meaning to rest for just a minute. Suddenly—probably I had dozed off for a minute—*plop!* a blimp descended upon me, the collapse of Ringling Brothers' biggest tent. But no, it was only the Lieutenant Colonel hunting a woman after two years in the Solomons. He had come out to see what was keeping me and had thrown himself upon me full length, impetuous fellow! I gave a mighty heave-ho and bundled him off on the floor.

"Really, Colonel!" I said as I sat up. "You're not my type."

"Have pity on me," he begged, clasping his knees in his arms.

"Sorry!" I stood up and straightened my dress. "You'll just have to pull yourself together."

"But you're my second choice!"

"Well, gee—thanks!"

"Oh no, wait, Cassandra—you don't mind if I call you Cassandra? You wouldn't want me reduced to that old hag in there, now would you?"

"If you're that reducible, brother, that's your tough luck!" And I waltzed off and left him to pick up the lubberly pieces as best he might.

Delaney came home a little after ten and drank a warm gin-and-ginger-ale. We were out of everything fit for human consumption. He sat under the floor lamp, his bright hair spinning a nimbus of radiance, his profile pure Greek classical, his eyes ga-ga and unbelieving as he openly stared at the Colonel and Mrs. Flugleman. The Colonel was showing her his album. He sat holding the huge leather book on his lap, turning the pages for her with absorbed pleasure. Mrs. Flugleman brushed against him frequently as she leaned over to scrutinize this photo and that one. Many of them had been taken before the war. Suddenly, the New Englander cropped out in her, perhaps some old whaling instinct.

"Why, Colonel," she cried, "you've been everywheah! Indier! Chiner! Russier——"

"And now Florider!" added Delaney irrepressibly. But Mrs. Flugleman was too far gone to hear. She and the Lieutenant Colonel were in some bright world of their own, wherein flabby male arm and drooping female breast exchanged glancing blows, purposefully, as if by accident.

The Colonel was trapped. He was pushed into the end of the sofa at the corner of the room. Mrs. Flugleman had gradually worked him over. It must have been breathless there, for great drops of sweat turned pear-shaped on the Colonel's brow. She was leaning against him now at a marked list, her folds of flesh lapping and overlapping against him, her eager face a scant inch from his lips, grasping his words instantly they issued from his throat, with coos of pleasure and approbation.

"Gad," muttered Delaney. "She's going to crawl right between his tonsils."

Suddenly Mrs. Flugleman flung her arms upward. "Whoo! It's wahm in heah!"

Delaney threw me a hysterical look, a wild light in his eyes.

"Let's go out on the terrace, Colonel. Catch a breath of ayah!" And she drew herself up languidly, brushing the Colonel full length, and throwing her weight backward on her heels, she tugged appealingly at his hand.

After they had left us Nadine and Delaney and I sat looking at one another foolishly. "Well," I said in a loud voice, "we might as well go to bed." And we turned off all the lights in the lobby save one, thoughtfully leaving the terrace darkened. Shortly after I collapsed into bed I heard Mrs. Flugleman plunge with solid step up to her room and her door overhead close with a purposeful bang.

"Oh no," I thought. "After that tender scene, don't tell me the Colonel from the Solomons has met with a third repulse!" But all was quiet and I fell asleep.

Some fifteen over-silent minutes later, Delaney roused

to the faint creaking of a door opening on the balcony and pressed his curious face to the window. Tippy-tippy-toe. Tippy-tippy-toe. A nocturnal apparition issued forth wearing a long floating negligee zippered to the bust. Tippy-tippy-toe. Tippy-toe. Pale as tallow in the wan moonlight, the phantom descended the outside steps and disappeared under the bougainvillea vine.

Delaney was horrified in the morning. "How perfectly disgusting!" he said, standing in my kitchen. "The most revolting display I ever watched in my whole life! How could that man bear to touch her?"

I stooped to test a pan of cornbread in the oven. "Well," I answered, "the Colonel isn't exactly Dreamboat of World War Two himself!"

"But she's so *old*!" And the way Delaney emphasized "old" sounded like wind howling dismally from a cave.

"Sex knows no age distinctions, Delaney. An octogenarian is apt to be just four times as frisky as a twenty-year-old. Stick around!" The tender, sensitive membrane that was Delaney's hide was easily bruised. He reared back his head and was about to hurl himself from the kitchen in disgust at my coarseness, when over our heads arose a song. "Hearken!" I said. A soprano voice in full cry surrounded by waterfalls soared higher and higher, splitting ajar the gates of heaven. Mrs. Flugleman was singing in the shower.

RANDALL: *Some Blessed Narcotic*

I REJOICED WHENEVER I CAME IN FROM THE AIR BASE and Nadine told me Hobson Hawes was planning another picnic. He owned a wild stretch of shore out at Bluff Point on the Gulf, and I think the old boy must have guessed how much I loved it there. "That soldier boy of yours be here tomorrow?" he'd ask Nadine, coming through the lobby in one of those god-awful Florida get-ups he affected—sport shirt with pink flamingoes, mauve slacks, and sandals exposing bulging toes. "By George, we'll have to have a chicken picnic for him!"

I had a special feeling about that patch of rocks and sandy shore with its ominous overhang of cliff. The Gulf sprang alive for me there. The waves with ribbons of wind came rushing to greet me . . . glad, glad to see me. . . . "Say, Pilgrim, why so late and slow to come?" . . . The foulness and darkness blew back from me. I breathed, stretched tall, felt myself a part of something. . . .

Anyway they were great stuff, those picnics. Even Cass consented to go to them. The last one we had must have been around the middle of April. To my crushing disappointment Cass invited Raydella Rose and her latest screw-

ball acquisition, Doctor Sanson Dwindell. But when I complained in the kitchen, Cass said, "Now listen, Randall baby. You and Nadine always wander off. I'm not going to be stuck with Hobson alone."

I got out of uniform and into some comfortable pants and a heavy sweater. You needed something warm when you picnicked on the Gulf. The girls took along their big coats to put on after the sun went down. I helped Hobbie load all the picnic paraphernalia into the trunk of his Cadillac. It was a big yellow convertible job dripping with chrome, and—I hate to tell you, vets of Luzon and Iwo Jima—it was new, fresh off the griddle about the time you were staging your little shindigs. "Want to drive 'er, Randy boy?" he boomed. And say, bowling down the Tamiami behind the wheel of that thing, maybe the crud of New Guinea didn't drop off of me in chunks! Sergeant Peters, if you please, strictly top-drawer. Nadine sat in the middle next to me, with Cass on the outside. We put Hobson in the back seat alone, puffing great clouds of perfecto maduro. Thank God, Dwindell had his own car and we didn't have to take him and Raydella Rose with us.

"Hobson, you old horse-thief," Cass yelled, "I sure feel sorry for you, stuck with this egg crate!"

I bellowed, "How many ration stamps did this set you back, Hobbie?"

He grinned and grinned, flattered to the auricles of his black heart.

We drove through marsh country with inlets and bayous and lagoons, and then, bang, right in the face you smelled it—always a change of air, and then the Gulf! The sight

took your breath away, the rocky coast, the rushing waves. The road appeared to run right into it. I swung the car sharply to the left and followed a lane to the bluff. We piled out of the car and scrambled with the baskets down the steep, jagged embankment, laughing and screeching, to the beach below, with shelves of rock and reefs reaching far out into the water.

Doctor Dwindell's car drove up and Raydella Rose jumped out. The doctor was a quack exhibitionist who advertised some psychotherapy method—"Cure the mind, cure all!" He was carting a victrola and a machete, planning to show off with the latter by hacking out hearts of palm for a salad. But you can bet your bottom dollar he didn't cut down any palmettos, not while Hobbie was around! And Cass made him take the victrola back to the car.

"This is nature!" she said. "Try breathing. It'll be a wonderful experience."

"How can you stand that bird?" I asked Raydella Rose.

"He's a sex maniac!" chirped the simple twit. You could never get a serious word out of her.

We set up a folding table with camp stools—Hobson had brought everything—and began opening hampers. Hobson laid a charcoal fire in the shelter of a flat outcropping of rock. He put a vast iron skillet on the grill and filled it with snowy shortening. He was strictly short-order, but man! could he french-fry chicken! He opened great bagfuls of plump pullets and cockerels, cut, salted, peppered and dredged with flour, ready to plop into the hot grease when it reached the just-so degree. He squatted on his

haunches watching. I thought he was never going to start. He could tell when it was ready just by looking at it. Suddenly he swung into action, launching piece after piece, breast and thigh and leg and back and wing. It turned golden brown before our eyes, a beautiful sight to see, the delicious odor rising to the nostrils. It cooked in no time, crisp on the outside, tender and falling from the bone with all the juices sealed inside.

Cass and Nadine unpacked the rest of the lunch, including my favorite salad with cucumbers, tomatoes, sweet red and yellow peppers, and whole celery slices stuck together with blue cheese. We had French bread spread with unsalted butter and glistening ripe olives packed in olive oil. Hobson made great pots of coffee. But all these things were mere garnishing for the chicken. We sat with our elbows on the table and ate chicken, and ate chicken, and ate chicken, throwing the bones over our shoulders, the gulls swooping wildly behind us to snatch them away. The cliff jutted above us with palms and tall weeds blowing, the Gulf flowed in joyous waves curling on the reefs, the sea birds flew overhead. Once we saw a porpoise cut slow scallops across the distant water.

After the chicken came rest and digestion. We waddled about a bit, putting it down. Nadine and I wandered out on the reefs, leaping gaps and squatting to watch miniature marine life in small still pools. The wind tore our hair and whipped Nadine's slacks at the ankles. Later we sat on the sand playing with fiddler crabs. Then—when we were able to bear the thought—we returned to a fresh pot

of coffee and Cass's immortal chocolate cake. An almost custard-like affair, held together with chocolate butter icing, so rich that Cass carried it in a portable ice box to keep the frosting from running. It took exactly one pound of butter; old Hobbie, whenever he planned a picnic, appeared at the Kumquat the day before, laid a yellow carton on the kitchen counter, and silently slipped away. The civilians confessed to feeling horrible guilt pangs as they ate; but I of course, being a soldier, felt the treat was no more than I deserved.

I looked at Cass in her red cashmere sweater with a scarf tied around her hair, as she cut a great wedge for Hobson's second helping. If he failed to consume a quarter at a sitting, he was slipping. She had the tender preoccupied expression of all good cooks.

I said, "Cass, I know now why Hobbie puts up with you. It's this cake!"

Cass thoughtfully poised the knife in midair. "No. A good Kiwanian like Hobson can't help keeping an eye on his adjoining property—thinking how nice it would be to round out his holding!"

And there sat the old grinning sinner, taking in the ribbing and loving it!

Dwindell, now that his craw was filled, began to quack some of his psychosomatic bilge. I got up and held out my hand to Nadine. We left the others still sitting at the table and went climbing up the embankment. We crossed the point and scrambled down on the other side. A strip of sloping white sand ran as far as the eye could see.

"Look!" said Nadine, seizing my arm. There at the water's edge was a heron. "Why are they always lonely? And why do they stand on one leg?"

"His name is Randall. He's waiting for Nadine to make up her mind."

"He looks so sad!"

"That too," I told her.

The sunset bathed the beach in color. The wind softened. The Gulf stilled into golden ripples. We didn't talk. After a while we stopped walking and stood with arms around each other watching. The whole vast sky was suffused with crimson and saffron until even the easternmost clouds reflected pink. We felt taller than ourselves, alone on the first day of creation.

We turned back and climbed the bluff. Down below us we saw the others gathered now around a bonfire. We rested near the ledge and I lay with my head in Nadine's lap. I took her square, pliable little hand, kissed the palm and the fingers one by one, and placed it on my forehead, closing my eyes.

"Last night I had an awful nightmare," I said. "A couple of guys in the barracks tried to wake me out of it and I threshed like a madman, damned near killing them. I thought I was lying on my face in steaming darkness and the Japs had one of our boys out there torturing him. I could hear his screams and cries for help. And I could do nothing . . . nothing . . ."

"Oh, Randy," Nadine said mournfully.

"Funny how I've started dreaming lately," I went on. "Of course some of the fellows dreamed right straight

through. But everything's been quiet and still inside me, waiting. As though I were under some blessed narcotic. Now I guess it's wearing off."

Nadine caressed my face, stroking the hair away from my forehead.

"Always I dream I'm in the hog-wallow of New Guinea. I'm in a raid and I can't get to cover. Sometimes I'm stalking Japs. I see a crumpled thing shot down from a tree, caught and dangling, and when I come up to it I find it's me."

Nadine lifted my head against her breast and reaching down, kissed my eyelids. "Poor Randy."

"I had a new guy in my outfit once, a mama's boy with a soft appealing face. During a raid he dug in under a nice big protective pile of stuff—only, as it happened, it was an ammunition dump. He was blown to hell and gone. We never found so much as a panty-waist button. Christ, how I hated to draw a nincompoop like that under me! Never be trusted with the simplest detail without getting himself killed. But I kept trying to look after him. And then he did a goddamn dumb thing like that right inside his own perimeter!

"And now I dream about the simple bastard. God damn him anyway! I'm looking for him . . . looking . . . looking. And I find a finger, maybe." I opened my eyes to Nadine's tender brooding face. I sat up, disgusted with myself. "When I'm with you everything's wonderful. I don't know why I get off on that stuff."

"You have a right to tell it," she said.

I shook my head. We sat in silence for a few minutes.

Then I began again. "If we could have a little house right here on this spot—and I'll bet Hobson would let us do it, too!—just live quietly for a couple of years, watching the Gulf and breathing the wind, I think we could figure it all out! Will you do it, Nadine?"

She dropped her eyes. "Maybe, Randy. Maybe."

"Or look! Let's go to the Rockies. Be cut off all winter in a cabin. It's magnificent there. Everything's pure—the air! the water! Catch such ice-cold trout as you've never eaten. The forests are full of little furry animals, and the deer come and look at you. . . . Oh, Nadine, let's do it! Let's plan on something like that to get our bearings. Then afterward we'll live any place you like. Will you?"

"Maybe, Randy."

"Don't keep saying that!" I reached over and shook her. "Say you'll marry me. Don't put me off."

"Randy . . . Randy . . . I can't! I can't just yet. You'll have to give me more time."

Time . . . time was running out for me right then, and I didn't know it. I felt the ugly jealous mood settling upon me. The sunset had deepened and turned purple while we talked, and now it was dark. We stood up and stretched ourselves and climbed down the rocks to join the others, sitting by the fire.

The minute we came back into the fold, Dwindell started enlightening me on how much he could tell about people from their habits and reactions. Did we scratch our noses?—we were introverted. Were we subject to motion sickness, allergic to mosquito bites?—we were a quaking mass of fears and unresolve. Did we fancy we had sinus

trouble?—there was no such thing; it was a compensation mechanism, the same as migraine headache, to excuse our shortcomings to ourselves.

I wasn't thinking of anything in particular, hardly listening to him. Nadine stood up to help Cass repack the hampers, and Hobson began folding up tables and stools. The rest of us got lazily to our feet, standing around the fire, with Dwindell still talking. Nadine came over to throw some picnic debris on the flames. Dwindell was saying, "I can also tell a lot about persons from their physical attributes. For example, I can determine many things from the shape of a woman's breast——" and as he spoke he reached out his hands and felt clinically of Nadine's bust. She jumped away from him in surprised fury and resentment, narrowly missing the fire. I lunged forward and knocked the son of a bitch flat. If his head had hit a rock instead of the sand I might have killed him.

Hobson threw himself against me, and Cass and Raydella Rose grabbed at my arms. I was quivering like a dog. Nadine ran to me, put her arms around my waist and laid her cheek against my thundering heart. Then, as I grew calmer, I shook the others off, standing quietly and clasping Nadine close.

Raydella Rose helped Dwindell sit up as he came to. "What'd you want to do a thing like that for?" he whined, holding his jaw. "You're neurotic and unaccountable, soldier-boy. You're paranoiac. You belong in an institution right now!"

I had hit that guy with every intention of killing him. It was as though some vast scarlet blood bubble of rage

had burst in my brain. Hobson drove home and I sat with Nadine in the back seat. She held tight to my hand, while I stared out the window.

God damn it! All I wanted was my girl! I wanted my girl to love me! And I wanted my girl for my wife! Was that asking so much? . . . Apparently it was. . . .

Reunion in Champion City

CASSANDRA: *Sky Fall*

ON FRIDAY, THE 27TH DAY OF APRIL, I WAS LATE IN going for the afternoon mail. As I turned downtown at Pineapple Street, I saw the bus in from the base pull up and Corsie get off. I cut into the curb, causing irate honking from cars behind me, and picked her up.

"That bus was stifling!" Corsie rolled down the window before settling back. We rode in silence for a few minutes, two old friends used to one another.

"Rumors are all over the base," Corsie told me, "that the war in Europe is about to end."

"Something's in the wind. You can feel it."

"What would it be like, to have the worry gone? I'd never complain about anything again."

I stopped the car for a traffic light. "You don't think you would, huh?"

She laughed. "Well, anyway, not for a while."

I drove on. "I have some sad news. Old Creepy in Five left this morning. And Flugleman's digging out from under her sandpile."

"Hooray!" Corsie clapped her hands.

"I'll have to set fire to everything in Flugie's room."

"Why do the loathsome ones always stay until the last? I really felt bad when the Gleasons drove off."

"Did you see the stuff they took with them? Coconut baskets, alligator purses, pillows embossed with CHAMPION CITY. . . ."

We were in luck. There was a place to park right in front of the post office. We climbed the broad steps, turning down the corridor to the rows of boxes. Corsie stopped to peer through the glass while I fumbled for the key. "There's an army air mail!" she said eagerly. I unlocked the door and pulled out the usual bills, ads, newspapers. I handed the air mail to Corsie without even looking.

"It's for Nadine!" she exclaimed. I took the letter, examining it. The return address startled me so much that I forgot to stop for groceries.

I came in the back way. Nadine was dressing for her date with Randy, standing in her slip at the dressing table. "A letter for you," I said as lightly as I could.

"For me! Who could be writing me?"

I'd planned to get out of the room so she could be alone when she read it, but I only made as far as the door. Nadine uttered a little shriek and leaped backward. "It's from Steve!" she cried. She ran a frantic little circle and to my astonishment she burst into wild and hysterical weeping. She threw herself to her knees by the bed, clutching the counterpane and hiding her face.

"He wants a divorce! I won't—I'll kill myself first!"

"How do you know what he wants? You haven't even read it."

"He's met another woman and he wants to marry her—I know it! I'll kill myself . . ."

It occurred to me that I ought to slap her or throw cold water on her. Instead, I closed the door behind me and knelt beside her, taking her firmly by the shoulders. "Nadine!" I said as sternly as I could. "Get hold of yourself. You're talking like an idiot. Here, give me that letter. I'll read it to you." I extracted the letter from her hand and smoothed it out.

I felt sick with apprehension at what I might find. Why did the poor little nut have to be so crazy about the man? My fingers trembled as I opened it, Nadine shaking with sobs beside me. "*Dear Nadine,*" I began. I gave her a smart spank on the buttock. "Listen to me!" Her sobbing quieted. The letter was written in a firm sharp backhand. "*I'm flying down to Champion City on Friday, May 4th, provided I don't get bumped. I'll soon be on my way overseas and I must see you before I go. I know this is pretty obvious, using the 'soldier off to the front' approach, but I hope you won't refuse me. I've a lot of things to talk over. Will get in touch with you as soon as I arrive. Please be there.* STEVE."

My voice had grown steadier as I read. Finally—"That doesn't sound like a divorce to me," I said flatly.

A long silence. Nadine came slowly to an erect sitting position, shuddering with a dry sob or two. "Let me have that," she said and she snatched the letter from my hand. "*Dear Nadine,*" she mumbled. "*I'm flying down to Champion City on Friday, May 4th, provided I don't get bumped. . . .*

"Why," she exclaimed, "he's coming here!"

"That seems to be the general idea."

Her face puckered, the tears lying on her cheeks. "He's going to ask me for a divorce."

"Stop being a goose," I said, getting up off my creaking knees.

"Cass! What'll I say to him?" She grabbed at me frantically. I sat down on the edge of the bed and took her face in my hands.

"Listen, dopey! Why don't you just let events take care of themselves? Go on out with Randall tonight and have fun. Then next week when Steve gets here, see him and find out what he wants! That's all there is to it." Her face reminded me of a kitten's, looking up at me in such blank wonderment. I had to smile at her. "You didn't tell me Steve was a lieutenant."

"Lieutenant?"

I showed her the return address on the envelope. "I didn't know," she whispered. "He must have got a commission."

"You don't say!" I exclaimed, laughing at her.

She clutched my hand. "I can't go out with Randy tonight. You've got to tell him."

"Ho-o-oh, no!" I said. "Tell him yourself."

"I can't!" She shook her head helplessly. "Please, Cass!"

For once I was adamant—or nearly so. She finally agreed to talk to Randy in the morning if I would put him off for just this one night. I closed the door and left her standing in the center of the room, looking lost and vacant, the

letter folded in her hand. Well, anyhow, I had her on her feet.

Randall Peters was not easy to handle. I stopped him outside on the terrace. "Can't I see her even for a minute?" he insisted. "What's the matter with her? Is she very sick? Did you get a doctor?"

"It's only a little upset," I equivocated. "She just doesn't feel like going out."

"I could stick my head in the room. She'll think I'm a fine one, not even asking how she is!"

"Randall, there are times when a woman wants to be left alone."

Ran indicated half an inch with his finger and thumb. "Just a crack in the door——"

"No. You can telephone her in the morning. Now you be a big boy and go off to the movie."

I watched him walk away, his frown puzzled, his feet dragging. This was going to be rough.

And it was rough. He was back early the next day. I expected Nadine and him to closet themselves in my living room. But instead they began arguing in the middle of the kitchen, evidently relegating me to standard equipment along with stove, sink, and refrigerator. I busied myself cleaning vegetables.

Ran was white with anger—not raging, but quiet, stony, stunned. Nadine didn't show him the letter, but she told him truly what was in it. "So you see, Randy," she said, shaking her head sadly, "I won't go out with you again until after he's been here."

"Why not, for God's sake?"

"Because I don't know my own mind. I have to find out what he wants."

Ran stared at the floor. "No, you're not even going to see him—unless I'm there with you." He looked up at her angrily. "What kind of a guy do you think I am? Let you be alone with that buzzard? If he has anything to say, he can say it in front of me."

"No, Randy!"

"I wouldn't dare leave you with him. He might talk you into something. I'm not going to give you up, Nadine!"

"But I don't want you there."

"Look! I'm the man who loves you." He turned to me in desperation. "Isn't it right, Cass, that I should be there?"

I scraped a carrot vigorously. "Don't ask me—I'm out of it."

"I never promised you a thing, Randy!" Nadine cried, suddenly angry in her turn. "I never said I loved you. You've got to let me alone until after I've seen Steve!"

Randy was dogged. "I should be such a chump! He'll find some way around you."

"Stop saying that! I'll decide for myself. Neither you nor Steve can tell me what to do now. Besides, I don't know what he's after. He probably wants a divorce."

"Fat chance! I know his sort. Wants out! Pasture looks juicier over the fence. Wants back! Seems greener where he was. I hate his guts!"

Nadine sank down on the stool, changing her tone. "Don't you want me to be happy, Randy?" she asked softly.

"*I'm* going to make you happy. That's my life work."

"But I don't love you."

"I'm going to make you love me."

It went on and on like that, getting nowhere, Nadine looking up at him from the stool, and Randy leaning against the counter now, his arms folded, his face hurt and hard. But little by little Nadine won; little by little Randy swung around. The one who loves the most is apt to be the one who loses, weakened and made vulnerable by his emotions. Nadine, for all her tenderness, had a woman's scheming brain once she knew what she was after. A brain seasoned to wheedling through many eons, trained during dark patient ages to twist the dominant male to her own ends—our long inheritance from Eve.

At last Randall gave way. He was haggard with doubts, beside himself with worry; but he promised faithfully not to interfere until after Steve had been there and Nadine had made a decision.

"I'll call you, Randy. Just as soon as I know."

"Fine, fine," Randy said, an awful drawn look about his mouth. They were standing facing each other again in the center of the floor. "I'll just slink off to the pound and wait for you to whistle for me. Why don't you take me out and shoot me? It would be easier."

"I never wanted to hurt you, Randy! I can't help the way things are!"

"I suppose you can't."

And so it came about that Randy went away, unwillingly and with many a backward glance, to do the only thing he knew of to pass the time away—to get drunk.

NADINE: *Reunion in Champion City*

IT WAS FIVE O'CLOCK WHEN STEVE CAME. HE DIDN'T telephone. A cab stopped out in front and there he was. Cass looked out the window and said to warn me, "Hm-m-m, I see what you mean! Front and center, Nadine." I dropped the magazine I was pretending to read and rose from my chair. He was coming up the walk.

It had taken me hours to get ready. I stood in my closet eyeing my clothes with distaste. I had a new dress, pale pink, but at the last minute I decided it was too new, too nice. Next, I tried the blue one that Randy liked; but it was too warm. Then I put on my flowered silk jersey; but it was a fussy ugly thing—I didn't know why I ever bought it. My eye returned to the pink dress, shroudlike on the hanger, pleated, cool; but much too pretty for the man who'd deserted me. I took off the jersey and rehung it, and sat defeated in my slip on the edge of the bed. Well, I would not wear the pink, that was final. I stood up, closed my eyes, and grabbed into the closet. If I looked hideous, so much the better.

Cass came into my room as I was struggling into the flowered jersey. "No," she said firmly. She handed out the

new dress. "Put this on and stop torturing yourself. We bought it especially, remember? There's nothing so devastating to a man's armor as a woman in pink."

"Look at my hair!" I said helplessly. "It's ruined."

Cass picked up my comb and I sat at the dressing table while she put the wave back in. I pulled out a necklace the Gleasons had given me, doubtfully holding up creamy shells with brown speckles against the pink. "But that's perfect!" cried Cass, tying the brown cord. "Now bring on that Steve—let him see what he chose to cast away!"

When I saw Steve coming up the walk, all at once I was miraculously calm and sure of myself. I had planned to meet him in the privacy of Cass's living room, but instead I went forth on the terrace. I didn't say anything. I just stood there waiting for him to say something, and he looked me over and I looked him over. If I had any secret hope of his being worn and showing need of me I was wrong. Far from a green private now, he was trim and at ease in his officer's uniform. He looked lean and hard-bellied and his short haircut became him. He stood there, a garrison cap in his hand, and I don't know what he was thinking. Finally he smiled and shifted his position and said quietly, "Hello, kitten."

It made me angry. He couldn't have said a worse thing after all these months, just as though nothing had ever happened. I answered sulkily. "Hello, Steve."

"May I come in?"

"You should have telephoned!"

He dropped his eyes for a second. "You might have told me not to come."

I could feel myself waver. I'd planned to be cool and reserved. I turned away, saying almost rudely, "I guess you might as well come into the lobby." He walked rapidly across the terrace and held the screen, and we went in. Delaney stared curiously from behind the counter as I introduced him. And Cassandra (I thanked God for her!) took over the conversation after we seated ourselves, asking pleasant impersonal questions as though she knew nothing at all about him. He answered her absently, turning his eyes to me again and again. He was now at Fort Monmouth waiting to be sent overseas, he said. Very soon he stood up.

"My time is short," he apologized. "I'm hoping Nadine will let me take her to dinner somewhere." He said it with a kind of formal question mark at the end. I pressed my cold hands together in my lap. It occurred to me he had no luggage with him, that he must be going back that very day. Then that must mean he'd come down only to talk me into a divorce.

"We can stay here," I said sullenly. "We can go next door to the Paradise."

"Oh, Nadine," Cass cried, "why don't you take the wagon and drive to Guava Jelly Inn?"

"No," I said stubbornly. "If we go anywhere, we'll just walk down to the Enchilada. It's as good as any place in town."

"I'll order a cab," Steve said, looking around for the 'phone.

"No, we'll walk."

Cass stood up. "I'll drop you off," she said quietly.

All the way downtown Cass kept up her blessed chatter,

while I, in the middle of the wide front seat, sat lost in confusion. It seemed I must be imagining that Steve was at my side. He leaned against the door, not touching me. When Cass let us out I felt a recurrence of panic. I threw her a frantic backward look, but she clasped her hands in the air like a prize-fighter and shook encouragement.

As usual the place was packed. We were put at a table near the service doors, with people cramped in so closely around us that the waiter had trouble getting through.

Steve raised his voice against the clatter of the kitchen and the din made by the crowd. "A drink? Sherry or something?"

I told the waiter I'd take a Dry Manhattan. When he left with our order, Steve said, "You sound like an old hand. I thought you didn't like bourbon."

"I do now." I dug into my purse for cigarettes.

"Smoking, too!" He struck a match and held it across the table, then lit a cigarette for himself.

"You used to smoke a pipe!"

"Too much trouble in the army."

The service doors flying open and shut made a continual swoosh . . . swoosh . . . swoosh . . . swoosh. Waiters juggled great loaded trays near our heads. When our dinner came we gave up all attempt at conversation. I hardly knew one bite from another as I ate, and sometimes, when I glanced up I was amazed to see Steve sitting there. A perfect stranger would have seemed less strange. I could feel him watching me. He said the food was good, and I said the pecan pie was good here too. But in the end we just ordered coffee.

When we finished, Steve sat studying me. "Can't we go some place where we can talk? How about the Shore Eden?"

I looked at him blankly.

"The Shore Eden," he repeated; "I left my bags there."

"Oh," I said stupidly. "That's a commercial hotel!" So Steve had luggage after all . . . probably catching the first plane in the morning.

"I thought it seemed rather peaceful," he said.

I started to stall. "The local people hardly ever go there. . . ." But then I realized that I might as well get it over with, hear what he had to say. "All right," I said, and I rose with him to leave.

To reach the Shore Eden from the Enchilada, you cut through the Arcade, turn down the main cross street to the pier, then turn again along a little one-sided street that borders the sea wall, and stuck back in there is the hotel. I had been so engrossed in meeting Steve that I'd forgotten all about Randy. I didn't stop to think that it was Friday night, that we'd be passing the Hotsie Enda. And there, by the most horrid mischance, we bumped into him. He and two other soldiers had been standing back in the entryway and they moved out on the street right in front of us. They were arguing. I saw him before he saw me, but by then it was too late to turn or do anything about it. I had never seen Randy so drunk or looking so awful. The other two soldiers came to attention and saluted Steve in an exaggerated drunken way.

Randy's mouth fell stupidly open, taking us in. "Jesus

Christ—no! Not a Second LOOtenant!" and clutching off his cap in a great gesture he bowed low, almost sweeping the walk. Steve took my arm and steered me around the men, frowning, ignoring Randy as best he could. I gave Randy a pleading look which he pretended not to see. As Steve and I walked on, Randy began to march after us in a kind of goose-step, singing some silly tune with the words, "If Second Lieutenants will win the war, then what in hell are WE fighting for?"

"Hey, Peters, come on!" yelled one of the two soldiers. Then, sensing trouble perhaps, they ducked back into the Hotsie Enda.

I felt Steve's hand tighten on my arm. He pushed me off to one side and turned around. "Look, soldier," he said to Randy in a reasonable voice. "Don't you think it's kind of pointless making a scene like this?"

Randy stuck his face down into Steve's. "Don't give me any of that patronizing big-brother-officer act!" And he turned to me insultingly. "You didn't tell me the big ex was in the brass!"

I said furiously, "Get away from here! You promised me, Randy!" His eyes were puffed and bloodshot, all intelligence and humor blotted from his face. "You're a mess!" I said in disgust.

Steve glanced curiously at me, then back to Randy. "Don't be a fool, Sergeant," he said quietly. "I haven't done anything to you."

Randy was staring at me stupidly—backing off from my scorn, I think; and now as he turned away he looked at

Steve. "Not done anything to me!" he howled with an awful laugh. "Not much, you haven't, you bastard! You've just got my girl—that's all!"

I thought Steve would surely hit him. He started forward, then stood rooted, his face turning slowly red. I drew a long breath as we watched Randy go tottering off down the street. In a low, constrained voice Steve asked, "A friend of yours?"

"Yes——" I couldn't think of another thing to say.

Steve said then, as though to dismiss it, "Well, he certainly is drunk!"

At the Shore Eden, Steve pulled a table out from the padded wall bench to let me slide in, and seated himself across from me. There weren't many people there. It was a spacious, old-fashioned room with white tile floor and blue walls and wicker furniture. The side where we were sitting was glassed in, overlooking the sea wall. The waters of the bay looked murky. It would soon be dark.

Steve gave a snort of laughter. "It's great stuff being a Second Lieutenant!"

"Randy's a nice fellow," I protested. "He didn't know what he was doing. Probably he didn't want to salute you."

Steve looked at me oddly and said impatiently, "Hell, I don't care whether anyone salutes me or not!" A waitress brought our drinks. But now that we were here where it was quiet, he still didn't talk. He took swallows of his drink and smoked a cigarette, all at once preoccupied and frowning. I felt flushed and uncomfortable waiting. I asked some questions about the army, and he told me a little

about his basic training and OCS at Asbury Park. But he spoke in that same absent tone he had used with Cass. My petulance returned. I was trying to be aloof and cool, but the suspense unnerved me.

"Well, if you intended to talk to me, Steve, why don't you talk?"

He laughed slightly, looking rather chagrined. "It's harder than I thought." He sat studying me again. "I've never seen you tanned before! You've put on weight. And your hair's longer—fluffier, or something. It's becoming all right. But you don't seem like my wife."

"I'm not your wife."

He seemed to ponder this. "No," he said. "And yet you never divorced me." I thought now he was leading into what was on his mind. I waited, tense. He just sat there looking at me, until I couldn't stand it any longer. "Why did you come?" I asked.

Without answering he stood up, moved around the table, and sat down beside me. He pulled his drink over. "I'm staring at you too much."

It was dark now. Soft blue lights were turned on in the room. The record changer was playing Hawaiian music. We watched the lights coming on along the pier, casting shimmering reflections in the bay. A whole shift in perspective took place—the room seemed to move in closer, and the sky and stars pressed at the window. I was in the corner with Steve beside me, not touching me, but sitting close by so that I couldn't have got out unless he moved. The plaintive nostalgic music wove itself in and out of our mood. And in just one short minute, everything was

intimate—quivering and intimate. All that had been disjointed between us was become suddenly smooth.

"I think," Steve said, not looking at me, "that more than anything else the difference in you is that you're cross! I can't remember your ever being cross with me like this before."

"What would you expect?" I was surprised.

"I know. I know." He laid his hand on mine gently. Just for an instant—then took it away. I stared at his hand lying on the table; not a large hand, but strong, with a tracing of fine hairs; a fastidious hand with short, immaculate nails. As I pulled my eyes away I could feel myself trembling. The wildest, most frantic desires stabbed at me. Sharp-pointed tenterhooks pulled and drew me taut toward him, as though they would tear out my bowels. I thought that if he touched me again I would die.

Steve talked on. "Maybe it's not fair coming back now, when I'm on my way overseas. I debated it. But somehow I had to. I took encouragement from the fact you hadn't divorced me. But I think I'd have come anyway. . . ." His voice died out. His face looked bleak. He bowed his head, and after a moment murmured, "Nadine, will you spend my last leave with me?"

That stab into the center of me again. My brain told me to say something cutting, cold. Instead I trembled there in my corner, pressing my arm against the cool wall.

"How long do you have?" I whispered.

"About two weeks."

"I thought you were going right back."

"That depends on you."

"But you said your time was short!"

"Two weeks is short."

In my confusion I didn't grasp what he meant; I only realized with numb relief that he was not asking for a divorce or telling me about another woman. I gathered vaguely that he was here to spend a last holiday with me, his lost wife, clutching some temporary happiness like any soldier on his way out of the country. I longed to squelch him, to hurt him in some way. And I could not. I clasped my hands tightly in my lap to keep from betraying myself. Oh, if I could have drawn myself up proudly, refusing him! Or thrown myself upon his mercy, saying, "Steve, Steve, what are you asking of me?" But I said nothing, lost in the quaking of my body beside the man it still adored. I grew more sultry and helpless; confusion was so heavy upon me I uttered no word of protest. When he paid the check and took me by the hand, I couldn't have resisted him any more than the rose the bee, the sea the wind. He gave me the look that he had when he desired me, that melted me when the world began and always will, I guess, until I die.

He took me through the lobby and up in the elevator, as though it had all been prearranged—as indeed I guess it had. It was in the elevator with my arm through his, and my hand in his, that he discovered my third finger with his thumb and looked down and frowned to see that the ring was gone. . . . He had a big double room and the key already in his pocket; he had been that sure of me. If he covered my face with kisses then, when the door was closed and I could not resist him as I could not resist him ever, I

struggled beneath my submissiveness in a sea of blackest resentment. He might have talked—he might have told me! Kisses are not words to say they're sorry. Kisses are not explanations of how things came to be. I hated him for taking me against my will, and myself for accepting him because I could not help it. If his man's face grew gaunt and beautiful in passion, it was lust limned it so—not necessarily love of me.

RANDALL: *Cap and Bells*

I HAD LOST MY GIRL. I KNEW IT. "I'LL CALL YOU, RANDY," she had said, "as soon as I know." But I could have told her then. I turned toward the saloons with no other thought than of blotting myself out.

Shorty Metcalf did what he could. He rescued me from some dive on Sunday night and took me back to camp and sobered me up. There, for three days, I went through surface motions, numbly treading the undertow. My war was over. My job of soldiering was done. My country had extracted such juice from me as it had need of, and had returned the rind, the hollow cipher. Then I had found my one sweet excuse for being—114 pounds of warm-eyed female, delusion lasting longer, firmer, fleshier, than my marshfire ladies of New Guinea. And at her touch it all flowed back, guts and blood and bone, hearthstone and hope and bliss. But now I knew she had been borrowed all the while—some other man's, never mine—it burned the emptiness into me. It wasn't the war that was unbearable, the beastliness, the rubble and fear of pain and death—it was being cut off like this, living in this empty purgatory.

Wednesday night Shorty made the mistake of taking me

with him to a dinner party out at some married couple's cottage on the Key. There I disgraced him, got myself falling-down drunk, insulted the wives, treated the civilians to a sloppy brand of sarcasm, and then wandered off outdoors and passed out. The guests were thus given the rare sport of hunting for me with lanterns in the mosquito- and snake-ridden swamp for a couple of hours so that Shorty could take home the body.

Thursday morning I left camp without leave and came to town and hit the bistros as soon as they were open. I think I had in mind some dim idea of seeing Nadine and pleading with her, but I lost my nerve. In the afternoon I picked up some babe who had a car. We milled around over at View Vista for a while. She bought the drinks because I was broke. She took me home with her ostensibly for dinner, and while I am sure I had agreed to her proposition, I am equally certain I left her with the justified wish to run me through a meat-grinder if she ever saw me again, since I departed abruptly without fulfilling my obligation. I was able to make a touch from some of my chums in the saloons, and late that night I wove my drunken passage out to the Kumquat May. All was dark and still. I found a spot in an empty lot somewhat sheltered by bushes, and sat propped against a royal palm watching Nadine's window. I guess I slept some, for at daybreak I came to all slumped over, thoroughly damp and chilled. I prowled back downtown to the Owl Car and got myself some coffee.

I hied up to Shorty's apartment, but he wasn't there. I forget whether he was away on duty or whether he was in

the hospital again. I used my spare key and went in and fell into bed for a while. In the afternoon I shaved and cleaned myself up and walked downtown to a movie; but I began to feel the awful need for a drink and left before it was over. It didn't take much to put me right back where I had been. I got palsie with a couple of green GI's. We came out of the Hotsie Enda around eight o'clock, I should judge, intent on going some place and doing something, I don't remember what. I do recall arguing in a drunken way over some triviality, and then—Christ! that was when I ran into Nadine and the son of a bitch who was the cause of all my misery. . . .

The ass I made of myself! She looked at me with scornful eyes. And the goddamned lieutenant never turning a hair . . . cool, smooth . . . said, "Don't be a fool, Sergeant . . ." I didn't rejoin my two GI pals—just sat at the bar and drank alone. I thought about that fellow having my girl. I thought of him walking out and throwing her up for grabs, and now just as easily turning back and taking her again. . . . She could look at him and think him so fine. She could take his kisses and offer herself with sacrificial joy. And I—I was the buffoon, the clown, who could try to divert her. At her slightest smile I could crow with delight, and remember it and light a torch to it, long hours and days after she had flicked me and my antics out of her thoughts.

Jealousy . . . His were the arms she would lie in. How I hated him! Except for him, she was mine. If it weren't for him, she would be with me now . . . sitting with me here . . . cocktails at the Zanzibar, red snapper at the Sea

'n' Shore, dancing at View Vista . . . racing the wind in Shorty's car . . . love in a roof room—"Pluck yourself a star, my man. You're as near to immortal as you'll ever be! Just reach out the window." The wheels in my head went round and round:

Give me a double bourbon, a double, double, double, triple, quadriple—ruplicate! Barkeep, put some whisky in it this time! Goddamn barkeep sees I'm drunk, going to deal it out with an eye-dropper. "Hey! Put some whisky in there!" Don't chisel. I'll go up to Shorty's and get me a bottle. Get away from this sweating bunch of hooligans, working at it, trying to have fun, trying to laugh it off—these apes who call themselves men.

Look at 'em! Brown apes in a cave. See how they squat in the smoky murk. Watch them swig the fermented grain. Now they sway to blare of brass and beat of drum. Each one goggling and sniffing and clutching his female. Housebroken to a man! God Almighty, Christ, hell's fire, yes! We've come a long way since we painted our faces blue, hunched over outdoor fires, wearing wolfskins. . . .

Bourbon! I'll give you one more chance. And if that running land-ape who's stolen my girl thinks old Tarzan here's going to let him get away with it . . . . . "A-Wowowowow!" That's pretty good. "A-Wowowowow!" . . . Huh? MP bouncer says for Crissake I'm making noise . . . Cut off my drinks . . . Get the hell out . . . Tarzan's disturbin' the apes! . . . Awright. I know where there's a li'l bottle, Tarzan . . . You don't haffa 'sociate with such mangy animals. Let's get on our li'l vine, just you and me, and swing on up to Shorty's. . . .

Good ole Shorty's. Nadine'll be here waiting for me. Put her arms around my neck. "Randy. I love you. Randy, save me from him! Save me, Randy, save me!" . . . Jesus . . . dark . . . nobody here. Nadine not here. Shorty not here . . . Who hid that lamp? Hell, it fell over. Get up there! The lamp's drunk . . .

Yes, I oughta save her. Got no right to come and take her like that, poor little thing. Charms her like a snake, that's how he does it. She wanted to love me, told me so, tried again and again to forget him. I know she did. I watched her. Wanted me to save her. Looked up at me, cried, "Randy!" Distressed, eyes pleading. Someone ought to knock him off. Get him overseas, put a .45 through his back. Not him, though, a charmed life, live forever. Nadine'll never take her eyes off him. Can't. Poor little kid. Such a poor boob—I stand by—let him get away with it. Such a poor fool—never even move a muscle—stand by while someone takes my girl—rapes her . . . Christ, who's doing that blubbering? Is that me? Buck up! Christ's sake act like a man, prop a boomstick up your spine.

Pour out the brown liquid into the little glass. There's a nice drink. A nice drink for a nice fellow. I like you! If nobody else does, I do. I say that from the bottom of my heart. I can't imagine a nice fellow like you out without your girl on a Friday night! what'd you do with her? Oh, I let some guy take her away from me. Just handed her over on a silver platter. "Here," I say, "take her, Bud." And she just cried! Called to me for help, cried, "Randy! Randy!" That's the kind of a son of a bitch I am.

I'm gonna get that guy! I'm gonna have a talk with him.

I'm gonna get that bastard if it's the last thing I do. Nobody's gonna take my girl away from me without hearing about it. I'd as soon shoot him as look at him. What the hell have I got to lose . . . Now where was that? Shorty's got those guns stashed around here some place. In the closet. No. Under the bed—that big old box under the bed. That's the ticket.

A forty-five. Too big. Hell, I'd need a holster. No, just drop it in a paper bag. Fine thing for an old trusty BAR man! . . . Hey, in that case there . . . nice little Colt, belonged to Shorty's Dad—blue-looking, cold as hell . . . Hmmm, shells in it too. Look in that muzzle, blue and cold, oily, Jesus, looks gummy! Shorty'd bust me if I left a gun like that . . . Could just take it apart, clean it up. Good light in the bathroom. See good. Empty the shells, spread them out nice on the floor. Sit right here on the toilet seat, might as well be comfy . . . Comes apart easy. Very, very nice . . . Punch it in there good . . . clean her up slick as a whistle . . . click, smooth . . .

Careful there, soldier, that gun's loaded . . .

CASSANDRA: *At the Point of a Gun*

I WAS AS NERVOUS AS A CAT. SOMETHING WAS ABOUT TO happen—I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. I couldn't settle down. I couldn't read. I kept waiting for Nadine and Steve to return, wild with anxiety to know the outcome. It gave me a queer feeling to see the two of them together. They belonged, somehow; they had an inviolable let-no-man-put-asunder look, even with the estrangement between them. It gave me a wrench. I mourned poor Randy and wished I hadn't encouraged his affair. Maybe it would have happened anyway, but I felt responsible for the whole thing.

I might have known that a woman wouldn't suffer the way Nadine had without great tides behind it, that there was some powerful pull of nature between her and Steve that wouldn't let them go. I'd rather supposed Steve might turn out to be one of those men who flounder all their lives, discontented, twisting forever at the lion's tail. But whatever faults he had or didn't have, I recognized at once that he was tough and proud and durable. He was a thinker, and a thinker's problems are not always easy to understand. He was quiet and deep—a type that is almost

invariably the sensitive and perceptive lover, the very best kind, who never wastes good libido in words or vulgarity or loose talk, sound and true as a golden coin, the thinker lover. A possessive woman could break her heart against the granite detachment in a man like that, but someone like Nadine who was not possessive, who gave and asked little in return except that she be allowed to go on giving, I would have said was perfect for someone like him.

But what did I care about him, damn him, if he didn't have the temperament and the taste to adore Nadine and make her happy? I loved her like a daughter—the man didn't exist who was good enough for her—and I was worried and nervous and fussed. And poor Randall was done for; it could not be any other way.

Night fell. Delaney went off duty and I stayed on the desk. There wasn't much activity. Officers and their wives had taken over my rooms at summer rates about as fast as they were vacated. A lieutenant and his dark-haired wife came in after mail, startling me. A family of tourists stopped for a room. I looked doubtfully at the children, but the little girl was plump and sleepy-eyed. I gave them the big front room with twin beds and an extra cot.

I closed the desk about ten-thirty, and sat out on the terrace for another hour, jumpy and brooding. About midnight, I gave up. I went into the apartment, got undressed and into a nightgown, and tried to relax and read. Once a little while later I thought I heard something prowling around outside. I didn't bother to investigate; anyone who worries about prowlers oughtn't to be running an inn. But soon thereafter came an unmistakable rattling at the kitchen

door. Well, I thought on a wave of relief, Nadine had forgotten her key. I sprang into a negligee, turned on the kitchen light and threw wide the door.

It was Randall Peters, looking very ugly. "Where are they?" he demanded.

"Who?" I asked stupidly—as if I didn't know.

He rattled at the screen and I unlatched it and let him in. He was drunk, deadly drunk—a cold, coördinated drunk with a purpose. He was not staggering, his speech was not thick, and I was not sure whether he was drunk from drink or from madness.

"What do you want?" I said as irritably as I could to stem the tide of fear that swept over me.

"You know damn well what I want! I want my girl."

A prickling at the back of my scalp warned me that he was holding something at the end of the long length of his arm. Slowly, slowly, my eyes traveled downward. I took a deep gulp of breath. "What are you doing with that gun?"

"Oh, that," he said, turning it over casually in his hand, and for a minute he seemed rather jolly. "Who knows, I might encounter a snake!"

"Randy," I said, "you'd better put that gun away."

"Let's not be silly!" He brushed me aside and began a systematic search through the apartment. Into Nadine's bedroom, stopping to look into her closet, into the bathroom, into my bedroom, and out through the living room into the lobby. I followed him, remonstrating. "What's the matter with you, Randy? Have you lost your mind? This is no way to solve anything!" He ignored me, holding the gun loosely at his side. Twice when he turned and found

me in his way, he pushed me with his gun hand, the blue-black thing hideous as a spider pressing flat against my chest. Suddenly he bundled me back into the apartment, closed the door, and seized me brutally by the arm.

"You haven't given them another room, have you? They're not upstairs?"

"No!" I said, anger flooding me with courage. "Put that gun down and get the hell out of here, Randy. You've no right to act like this!"

"I can wait," he said, walking into the kitchen. He sat down on the high stool, his back to the sink, where he could watch both doors. "They'll be here. I got time."

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked, my voice tinny and false.

Randy looked at me and laughed. I felt myself grow abruptly weak as though my knees were giving way. I'd seen Randy in a murderous mood once before, on the day he hit Doctor Dwindell. But that was violent anger. This was a cold, premeditated thing. "I can't stand this." I got myself somehow out of the kitchen past that gun into my bedroom. I leaned forward on the desk, fighting a black swirl. Ran came silently up behind me and spun me around.

"I hope you haven't any fancy ideas about using the 'phone!"

I blinked at him stupidly. I hadn't once thought of trying to call for help. In the acute silence as we stared at one another, I heard people come up on the terrace and open the front door. Randy turned on his heel, looking toward the hallway, his back to me, listening. I heard the rattle of

keys and a suppressed laugh. It sounded like Nadine . . . I was sure of it! . . . Nadine and Steve home . . . and Randy with that gun—— In a rush of panic I grabbed up the telephone, lifted it high, and brought it crashing down on Randall's skull. I am big and strong, and it knocked him sprawling. The gun flew from his hand and lay on the carpet, small and dark and ominous. I stepped over it and over Randall and closed and locked my bedroom door. Then—oh God!—I threw the key out of the window, forgetting the screen, and it bounced back in! Ran was trying to shake himself loose from the floor. I picked up the key and tossed it hastily into my shoes in the closet; if he went after it I'd lock the door on him. Ran flopped on his face again, and with the point of my toe I pushed the gun under the bureau out of sight. He was heaving himself into sitting position, a foolish look on his face, and I picked up the telephone. But I stood holding it in the air, and then I put it back down. I couldn't hit Randy again.

The blow had done something to him. He got to his feet but he staggered. He was foolish. He'd forgotten what he was here for. Yes, he'd forgotten, and now he was nothing but a very drunken young man, muttering thickly. "Cassie!" and he put his arms about my neck and began to whimper. "Where's Nadine? I gotta find Nadine. I gotta find her and help her. She needs me."

"I know, Randy darling," I said soothingly, patting his back. "Why don't you lie down here, dear, and rest?"

"I want my girl. Help me find her, Cass." He staggered from me toward the door, and I ran around in front of him and caught him and kissed him warmly. I must keep him

quiet and get him into bed and asleep. I couldn't risk his getting loose to confront Nadine and Steve with that gun, and I dared not hit him again. But I did know one very efficacious way to put a drunken man to sleep.

I am a hardened woman, grown calloused with living. Though I had not made a practice of bedding men I did not desire, it wasn't much of a trick for a woman of my age and experience to use her body to a detached purpose. It was a miserable matter, distasteful, deplorable. Randy snored off into the heavy sleep of the inebriate. And it was good that he slept; it was what he had sought most ardently these days—to sleep, to dream no more. If I knew anything about drunks—and I thought I did, having once been married to one for two years—he was out until some time that afternoon.

I located the key in one of my shoes and let myself softly out. I bathed my ancient body, grooming it without sentiment. And I sat up over a rank pot of tea, thinking rancid thoughts and cursing the war that made me drink cheap radio tea and cut me off from the good green subtle teas of the Far East—like that snoring boy in there cut off from manliness by the cheapness and tinhorniness of his time and the dearth of great hopes. Still, the need was there. Great needs make great men, it is said.

The door to Nadine's bedroom stood open and innocent. My living room and my lobby were deserted. Nadine and Steve hadn't come in at all. Well, let them come now whenever they would. I could untie the knot in my Girl Scout kerchief. My deed for the night was done.

DELANEY: *Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow*

IF EVER I WAS FED TO THE TEETH WITH A PLACE, IT WAS with the human sink-hole of a Kumquat May in particular and the environs of Champion City in general. And the epitome of all that was crass therein was Madam Cassandra, my erstwhile boss-lady. And I let her have it, too, just before I left.

I stopped in Friday night at Western Union about closing time, and to my utter astonishment Grandmother had kicked through—and for a lower berth. God knows what she had to hock to get it. I took some of my friends for a round at the Zanzibar. I grant you it was a gesture; but, hell, I was sick of the beer joints which had been all I could afford on the meager stipend from my clerkship. Then I went home and packed through the wee hours. Things were in kind of a mess, but luckily I didn't have too much stuff and a lot of it was dirty and I just threw it away.

I found out that the earliest train I could get went at seven o'clock in the morning. I checked over the money and discovered I had only enough left for coach fare, which was revolting, but it would have to do since nothing would deter me now. I looked in the till at the Kumquat May, but

it was empty—you could count on old Money-Bags Bickham not to overlook one thin dime. That slender token laughingly called my salary was paid up, in fact overdrawn. I really needed a few bucks for food en route, and I debated whether I would butter up Bickham and pry out a fiver, or whether I would treat myself to the rare pleasure of telling her off. I decided the latter dramatic possibilities were not to be missed, and on a day coach there was always a chance of sharing some dear old lady's lunch bucket.

I gave the old knock-knock at the chez Bickham door. I knocked loud and long because I thought I'd have to wake her up, and who knew who might be sharing her downy cot that night? But for some reason she was already up and was right there. She snapped, "What do you want, Delaney, at this unholy hour?"

"I didn't think it would be gallant," I said with the accent on the last syllable, "to go away without leaving you my tender adieus. I'm checking out. I'm blowing. In short, I'm escaping from this woodpecker's nest."

"Going? Back north?"

"You catch on. At least I never underestimated your grasp—of ideas or money or anything else you could get your claws on."

"What are you talking about, Delaney?"

"You, you old Stinkaroo! You old Grimalkin. You missed your calling. You ought to be running a bagnio."

I had pricked her. She frowned in a pained sort of way. "Don't babble, Delaney. And at half-past six in the morning, too. If you're going, goodbye and God bless you." And she would have closed the door—but I had my foot in it.

"Not so fast, you contaminated old crone. Of all the parsimonious, opinionated old hags with delusions of grandeur, you are the worst old whore from across the tracks of them all."

"Delaney," she said with false quiet, driven to deliver a little homily, "you're homesick. Go on home. Don't say a lot of things you don't half mean."

"I haven't the faintest notion——" I began, drawing myself up, inadvertently withdrawing my foot.

"Goodbye, Delaney," she said. "And good luck." And she closed the door in my face. Pretty weak on her part, wouldn't you say, if that's what a woman calls the last word?

My cab was waiting and I didn't want to squander good time shaking the Florida sand out of my shoes. And riding there in that foul coach I was just as glad she had thrown in the towel. I might have said too much. I wondered if it might not have been more devastating if I had just written a note. I could have said . . .

RANDALL: *Hangover*

THERE IS THIS TO BE SAID FOR A HANGOVER—WITH A really first-class one it is difficult to regret anything much but the hangover. I staggered out of Cass Bickham's bed some time in the early afternoon, with an egg on the back of my noggin that you couldn't get near with a breath of air. Oooo—sore! I had no idea where I got it or how I landed in Cass's boudoir.

I knew better than to look in the mirror, but something was going to have to be done, reluctant though I was to open that bedroom door. I sat on the edge of the bed awhile. Ordinarily I had a cast-iron stomach, but it was rocking me now. Detached, distended scenes from the past week loomed out of mind between waves of bilious nausea —one perfervid truth ballooning large above the rest, like a helium monster in shape of a donkey! I was an ass. Not that I cared much, clinging to the edge of the mattress, with waves of carpet leaping higher than my head. Nadine was the vacuum, the aching cavity at the center of the vortex. My thoughts eddied and whirled to escape the sucking pain. A strange bit of eroticism detached itself now and again, involving Cassandra. Was it real, or had I dreamed

it? Presumably a by-product of the lump on the head, it surely didn't tally with anything reasonable on land or sea—— Well, I had to get to the bathroom. I pulled a sheet from the bed and swathed it around me.

I stood under the cold shower until I began to shiver and turn blue, then I came back under my sheet to the bedroom and began the fumbling business of dressing. To my infinite relief the apartment seemed deserted. I longed desperately to get out and away before anyone saw me. But when I finally emerged, Cass was standing there in the kitchen, her arms folded, implacably waiting. I glanced at her out of misery too low for embarrassment, looked away, and glanced again, running my tongue over my parched lips. She was regarding me steadily. The afternoon brightness hurt my sore eyes. My nicotine-burned lungs gasped at the fresh breeze from the open window. Cass kept on looking at me. "Can you eat an egg?" she asked.

My stomach squeezed tight and flopped. I shook my head, shuddering weakly. I ran my hand over my face. "I could use a razor."

She went with me into the bathroom, produced a small gold razor, lady's model, and inserted a new blade. "No shaving cream." She handed it to me. She left. I lathered up with soap. But when I lifted the razor it was shaking so that I knew I'd never make it. I tried a few feeble downstrokes, gave up, and rinsed and dried my face. I noticed a swipe of blood on the towel, and pasted the cut with a shred of toilet paper.

I came out into the hall, stopping dead at the doorway looking into Nadine's room. Empty . . . so empty. Fore-

boding stirred. I welcomed a wave of nausea that made me reach for the door frame and steady myself. Far off, like a rock dropping into a well, I felt the hollow reverberation; postponing that awful sober moment when, with maggots of blown love eating at my guts, I would have to know again that Nadine was gone. I stared hungrily into the room, at the walls awaiting her presence, at the mirror awaiting her image . . .

I turned back into the kitchen. Cass still stood with folded arms, waiting. "The hair of the dog?" I queried wretchedly. Silently, efficiently, she moved. She brought down a bottle of brandy from the top shelf. Took out milk, powdered sugar, and cracked ice, mixing it in a shaker with a double hooker of the brandy. I propped myself at the wall, squeezing my eyes shut and open. The kitchen rocked. Window side went up, crashed down, sink and stove reared and plunged, Cass miraculously maintaining her footing in the slanting trough of linoleum. She strained the milk punch into a tall glass and inserted it firmly into my hand. Once I managed to get it to my mouth I was all right. I held it there, gulping thirstily until it was gone.

"I could use another," I said.

"Best wait a few minutes."

I tottered all the long way across the kitchen and sat down on a chair. Almost immediately my stomach settled. Floor and walls held level and steady. The relief was something wonderful. My mind was perfectly blank and I was not sick. Cass made another milk punch. "Sip this very slowly," she ordered. She brought razor and soap, tied a towel around my neck, and carefully began to shave me.

I was too derelict to protest. I studied her at this close range, wondering. Her expression was enigmatic, her lips pursed in concentration. She looked old, with brittle hair and dry skin, terribly tired around the mouth and eyes. She rinsed the razor at the sink and turned back again to me. I took a swallow of punch, tasting some soap with it.

"What did I do, Cass?" I asked suddenly. "I didn't hurt anybody, did I?"

"No. You didn't hurt anybody."

"This lump on my head?"

"I hit you."

I looked at her puzzled, but she made no further explanation. Some other time, I thought, some other time. I ventured to ask, "Nadine?"

"She left with her husband yesterday. She hasn't come back."

I nodded and looked away. My hands and knees were shaking again. Cass raised my chin, chopping away with short uncertain strokes.

She wrung out a wash-cloth in hot water, wiped off my face, untied the towel from around my neck. I got up, the shakes reasonably under control, my eyes focusing well, my brain blank. Cass found my cap. She was waiting for me to go. I turned to her in desperation. We looked at each other a long time . . . an awfully long time. But what was there to say?

Steven Wildraven

STEVEN: *The Husband*

NADINE WANTED TO GO HOME AND GET SOME CLOTHES and pack a bag, but I wouldn't let her. I wanted to keep her to myself, away from her friends. I tried to put down the ugly suspicion about the Sergeant as none of my business, but I wasn't liking it. We had breakfast in our room, with Nadine, her hair damp and curling from the shower, wrapped in my seersucker robe, the sleeves rolled back. After we dressed, I took her shopping for all the things she needed, and as soon as we returned to the hotel, she opened packages, took toothbrush and face cream, and disappeared into the bathroom. I heard her doing some washing and when she came out there were panties and hose on the shower rod. I felt like an old benedict who'd been restored to grace. She re-dressed herself, getting into a brown and white sleeveless affair that we'd found in a shop down the street.

I sat in a chair waiting. Had Nadine always been that pretty, I wondered? I watched her with her arms up, fastening her necklace. No, her face really had changed. She was older, and there was some brooding quality I had never seen, an added depth and beauty. I got up nerv-

ously then and went to stand by the window, remembering last night, when Nadine fell asleep and I lay holding her in my arms. She had sighed and stirred in her sleep. The tender weight of her numbed my left arm, but I didn't move. I had wanted to turn on the light and look at this girl I'd thrown away, now subtly become a woman, but I had been afraid of disturbing her.

When I was young I was ornery with girls. I'd been on the make the first time I met Nadine. But when she didn't resist me, when she tightened her arms about my neck and opened her eyes out of terror, looking up at me as though I were something wonderful, it took all the meanness out of me. She was the first live, loving thing I'd ever known. I had wanted to protect her and take care of her forever. I meant to prevent her from turning into cool woman, independent of me. I had wanted to keep her from pain. Yet in the end it was I who had brought her sorrow, not caring then. What had it been, that barrier in my brain? Somehow in the groping dark—I didn't know how, I didn't know where—I had found the way out, had come through on the other side. But even when I had started thinking again, when I began to miss my wife—even then, I saw her with a kind of fixity, moving safe and contented forever. Now I was shocked to realize her grief and amazed at the new wild depths in her.

A man is a fool. He can live all his life with a woman and know nothing about her. She reacts to him like a chameleon, takes on his color, and he thinks that's all there is to her.

Staring down at the narrow strip of beach beyond the sea wall left littered by the tide, I remembered something

I wanted to tell Nadine. She was putting on makeup. "Mother and Father came to see me while I was stationed at Fort Knox," I said. Nadine looked at me in surprise, holding a lipstick in her hand. "They seemed terribly old," Nadine said nothing. She looked back into the mirror, painting her lips. I went on, "To tell the truth, I felt sorry for them."

Nadine picked up her handbag and put some things in it. Her face was sad. She didn't try to answer me. Instead she said, "I'm ready." We were going out to wander around while I took a look at the town. Before I opened the door into the hall, I glanced at Nadine and smiled. I wanted to tell her the little dress was cute, that I thought she was lovely. Instead I found myself saying, "I still can't get used to your being so tanned!"

She flared out at me. "You had nothing to say about it!"

We walked up the main street, Nadine pointing out shops, the bookstore, the newsstand, banks and buildings. Then we cut back past the post office to the bay and turned along the south shore. We passed big hotels and a row of antique shops. There was a heaviness between us of things unsaid, but our talk was light. I felt in a new dimension, a blue tropical world, sand gritting on the sidewalk, walking with a strange brown Nadine. Then she said something in my wife's familiar voice and an overpowering sense of relief swept over me at being with her again. We stopped at a shop window, Nadine saying, "That silver tea set is the kind we always wanted, remember? You liked the wooden handles." I felt as if I had never been away.

We passed through a section built up during the first

Florida boom. Big old-fashioned southern houses with pillars and porches and heavily overplanted lawns. The street wound with abrupt turns, breaking off at dead ends. Sometimes an estate ran down to the shore and we detoured around it, and once we came to the mouth of a creek and had to follow back until we found a bridge. The dwellings became shabbier as we reached the outskirts, and then we began to pass row after row of cabin camps and cheap apartments, all overflowing with soldiers' wives and infants and small children.

"Just look at that!" I exclaimed.

Nadine lifted her chin. "I think it's nice they have children!"

I glanced at her. "Do you regret so much that we didn't have any?" She turned her head and wouldn't answer. I went on talking. "These young fellows today think they have it tough going into the army. They should try a few years without jobs, a glut on the market. They'd think they were lucky."

Nadine said thoughtfully, "Maybe it would be better than what we had."

"It's all past and paid for," I said. "I'm not bitter any more. Except I think now that if I hadn't been so bullheaded, things might have been different for us. I don't know why I was so hipped on swinging everything alone."

Nadine raised her head suddenly. "What made you leave me, Steve? What did I do wrong?"

"You know better than that," I said. "I didn't leave because of you. On the contrary, I stayed, worked at dull jobs,

just for the pay-check, so I could live with you and be your husband. When the war came—well, I always believed a man should make his life reasonable and orderly, do work that meant something to him. Instead, everything I'd done was pointless and makeshift. Then I'm suddenly snatched up, stuck into uniform and handed a gun. I didn't care about anything any more. It was as though I had to sacrifice you to escape from myself."

We'd stopped on the sidewalk while I talked. I looked into Nadine's questioning face. "Maybe the Army was a good thing for me. I stopped thinking. I submerged myself in it, breathed it, ate it, slept it. It acted like a poultice." Nadine was staring down at the sidewalk. I thought I ought to get off the subject, that I was making her unhappy. But when I ceased talking, she looked up quickly, still questioning, as though she wanted to hear more.

"I've come out of it," I told her. "Maybe I was suffering some form of shock. Surprising how many older men I ran into in the army said they'd never go back again to their old life and the old stupid grind. It's rebellion, but it blows over. After you find you can shoot and handle the dirty work as well as the next man, you settle down and do your job. I make a good soldier!"

The sidewalk ended. The civic palms ran out. The highway leading into the country pulled away from the shore. It was hot, with the sun beating our heads. We came across an old shanty lunch place by a creek and decided to go in and call a cab. But inside it wasn't too bad and we saw a luscious fresh lemon pie under a glass bell on the counter.

We sat down for a piece of it and ordered iced tea. A thin, worn, gray-haired woman waited on us. I made the mistake of starting conversation. "How do you make this place pay way out here?" She told me she had truck-driver trade, from the Tamiami Trail; then she stood over us talking a blue streak. She had learned to make pies at her mother's knee, she told us—up north, in Michigan. She wished to God she'd stayed there. She must have taken a fancy to us. She said if we wanted to go and sit a spell, we'd find a fine clearing beside the creek back of the shack.

We prowled around and discovered a little cove, well shaded, with a bench propped against a low slanting coconut tree. It was pleasantly cool there. We sat down on the bench. A big king snake came out of the thicket and sluggishly pulled his length at the edge of the clearing. Nadine made no move. "Do you want to stay here with that thing?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Probably he's a pet of that woman's. People like them. They eat mice." The snake gave us a bored look and taking his own good time drew out of sight.

"I thought you were afraid of snakes!"

"Some things you get used to."

The creek by the clearing formed a pool, then overflowed into a narrow rippling channel, drawn on by the sea. I reached for Nadine's hand. "Come back north with me," I begged. She looked at me, astonished, pulling her hand away. I said, "It might be a few weeks before I'm shipped. We're held up for replacements."

"You dare ask me that now!" she exclaimed, her voice quivering. "Are you playing with me or something?"

"Playing?" I repeated, dumfounded. "Good God!"

Nadine pressed her fingers to her temples. "Tell me straight. Just what are you asking me, Steve?"

It seemed foolish explaining what was so evident, but she was in earnest. "I'm asking you to come north with me. To live as my wife again. To wait for me while I'm gone."

"When did you decide that?"

I didn't get what she was driving at. "I don't exactly know. I've been thinking about it for months."

"Do you mean you flew down here with that in mind?"

"Certainly," I said, surprised. "You must have known. I wrote you. And I told you last night——"

"You told me nothing last night! I thought you were just using me."

I stared at her. "Using you? Don't you know me better than that?"

She shook her head. "I don't think I know you at all!" Her face twisted. She caught her lip in her teeth and began to laugh hysterically.

"Don't, Nadine!" I seized her in consternation by the shoulders. "What's the matter with you?"

She jerked away from me. "You've been thinking about it for months!" She jumped up and clenched her fists standing in front of me. "Do you know what *I've* been doing for months?" She waited a minute, her face deep red, framed against the green thicket, the ropy vines, and gurgling water. "I've been living like a tramp! Taking on anyone who showed the slightest interest. . . ."

Something inside me turned sick. I cut her off. "Don't tell me! You don't owe me any explanation."

"I want you to know! All the horrible things I've done. Passing on the hurt you gave me!"

I sat there stunned. I said doggedly, "You can tell me if you want to. It won't make any difference."

She backed away. "You don't even care!"

I came slowly to my feet. "Care!" I said, "Care!" I could hear my voice turn high and thin. "You were the sweetest, cleanest thing alive! Do you think I didn't know that? I could have killed that sergeant last night! But I haven't got the right. I know it's all my own fault."

She stood away from me, her mouth twisting. "Oh, don't be so noble! Call me names!"

"I call myself names," I said, so choked I could hardly speak. "I accuse you of nothing."

Nadine stood silent a moment, breathing heavily. She went over to the coconut tree, reaching out her hand for support. "You were certainly sure of me," she said. "You even had the hotel room."

"I made a point of telling the manager I was bringing my wife. I didn't want any unpleasantness if you did come."

Her back was toward me, her head bowed, her hair fallen and almost hiding her face. "You knew I'd come," she said bitterly.

"No," I said. "No. I only hoped you would."

"You couldn't be bothered to make explanations! You just took me up to that room like a—whore!"

I stepped over, whirled her about, and shook her. "Don't

say that!" I shouted. "Don't ever say that again! Why did you accept me if that's the way you felt?"

"Because I couldn't help it. I couldn't help it!"

The slattern from the shack came running to see what was the matter. She stopped at the edge of the clearing staring at us, her hands rolled in her apron. I let go of Nadine, straining to control my voice. "It's all right," I said. "My wife and I are just quarreling."

"Oh," the woman said, and started up the path.

I stood waiting for her to disappear. I felt terribly tired as I turned back to Nadine. "I guess it's good you couldn't help it, or you mightn't have let me see you at all. I've wanted you for a long long time. But I was still so sick and sour inside myself that I couldn't come and claim you. It's no good to say I love you—it's so much more than that."

She looked at me wildly, then rushing at me she began to beat with her fists upon my chest. "Why didn't you tell me that! Why didn't you tell me that last night?" She pounded at me with all her strength.

I caught her wrists and held them until she quieted, leaning against me. "Come back, Nadine." I took her in my arms. "I lied to myself when I said I didn't want you waiting. I do. I do. The war can't last forever. We'll find another house. We're not so old. Maybe we'll still have children." I held her away and looked at her. "Will you?"

She pushed loose from me. "Oh, be quiet," she said. "You know I couldn't send you away, even if I wanted to."

NADINE: *The Man on the Bed*

AFTER STEVE AND I CAME BACK TO THE HOTEL WE were so drowsy we took a nap. I got out of my sticky clothes into a nightgown, and Steve closed the venetian blind against the light. As I lay down I felt as though some terrible crushing burden had lifted from me, making me too giddy to sleep. And the blind was flapping. But I fell instantly into sound slumber, and when I awoke Steve's arms were around me.

He said, "I've been kissing you for ever so long. I thought you would never wake up."

I telephoned Cass. I had been too confused and lost to try to call her before. The room was hot and Steve lay naked on the bed, his arms crossed behind his neck, listening while I talked. When I hung up, he was frowning. "I don't see why you have to report to her. Who is she anyway? She looks hardboiled to me."

My flood of resentment rose again. I burned hot with the desire to slap at his conceit. I looked at him lying on the crumpled bed, so at home, so relaxed, so casual, so naked, so sure of me. And so familiar. My utter familiarity with his body hurt me. The long throat, the broad flange

of shoulders, the hard chest staved with ribs, buds of breast and tracing of hair, the lean abdomen and blades of hip, the sunken navel, the phallus, core and center of my love, lying limp now and turned upward in the hollow of the groin, the testes cool to the touch, the pressing thighs and long bony legs and ankles, the high-arched tender feet with long knobby toes. It hurt me, my knowledge of his body. So much of love. So much of hate. Which would win in the end, I wondered. Resentment mounting through the years, and bitterness? Or tolerance, the indifference of middle years? That would be best perhaps. And slow regenerating fondness until by death his very faults grew dear. Halves of one body, one soul. Grown together, fused. One dies, the other follows.

"Does she own that place?" Steve continued. "I'm glad you're getting out of there."

I went to the bed and clamped my hand tight over Steve's mouth. "Stop talking like a man!" I said. More muffled words came out. I took a pillow and stuffed it over his face and pressed down hard. Steve struggled and got loose and sat up, propping the pillow behind him. He pulled me down on the edge of the bed.

"All right," he said, half laughing. "What do you want me to talk about?"

"Oh," I mumbled, trembling inside, for I hadn't been joking. I'd really meant to shut him up, and my face was hot. "Talk about when the war's over. Talk about our house we're going to build. Talk about maybe if we have a baby. . . ."

And all at once I was terribly afraid. There would never

be security again anywhere, nothing to believe in, no one to trust. There was no future left to wish for. Only loneliness and waiting. And if Steve came safely back, what then? Could anything ever be the same? The running poisons of the sickness within me gathered and broke again against my will into one long last weeping. I pushed away from Steve, sobbing hopelessly into my hands. Steve reached out and gathered me to him, cradling and rocking me in his arms, his lips touching my forehead. "No, Nadine," he began to whisper. "No . . . No. . . ."

CASSANDRA: *Black Char*

I CASSANDRA BICKHAM, FEELING OLD BEFORE MY TIME, sat at my kitchen window staring out upon a burnt lot. The vacant adjoining property had been put to the torch, destroying the overgrowth. Palmettos along my line were badly scorched, and where all had been green and luxurious was now a black char.

I had heard nothing from Nadine since she left with Steve the night before. Instinct told me she was all right —very possibly she was not only alive and well, but happy too. But it kept nagging at me. Suppose something had happened to her, and here was I doing nothing. I had to sit on myself to keep from bouncing out searching for her and notifying the police and turning Champion City upside down.

And I brooded over Randy Peters, and I was sad about Delaney. I didn't know what had made Delaney act the way he did. It is such a shock to discover that someone dislikes you—how could anybody hate me when I'm so nice! That's the feeling. But in a way I was glad to see Delaney go. He was getting heavy. I'm too impatient with the

young, I know that. I keep forgetting how many wrong-headed years it took me to settle down to a realistic view. And who would go through the long torture of those young years again? Not I, not I. Forty years to get down to living. The body cools, the mind toughens. Life grows sweet.

In the hotel business sooner or later everyone leaves. But I did not see how I would reconcile myself to the loss of Nadine. Oh, she would write, but I know how those things go. A few letters, a gift or two, then finally a Christmas card once a year. That was my life, running through friendships, and loving people and losing them. I felt sorry for myself, looking over a burned-out lot. Still I wouldn't want to be anyone else. I'm used to me now.

And I thought of Randy and Delaney and all the sad young men and all the sad old men and all the sad middle-aged men, lost in a world grown too much for them. Women take these things better as a rule. Men are weak. Few are the women who are not humbled to earth-bound things, eternal drudgery of cleaning, lifetime dictatorship of the presumptuous male, pain and madness of the menses, care of the bowels of the sick and the young, copulations and birthings against their will, the care and smell and last astonishment of the dying. The root of the matter of adjustment to things as they are is bred in them. Not so men. They must tread some never-never land of their own sublimation, or drop to earth. I got so sick of men. I was glad I had neither husband, nor son, nor lover, to clutter me. I was glad I was old and stout of heart.

I clasped my hands between my knees and rocked on my

haunches, like an old crone. Outside my window a gray bird perched on an oleander twig, pumped up his bellows, and launched forth an aria. "Shut up," I said, "It's a little late for that." My telephone rang and I put down my hopes as I went to answer it. But it was—this time it actually was—Nadine.

"I'm at the Shore Eden with Steve," she said. "I'm sorry I didn't call you before."

"That's okay."

"Were you worried?"

"Not too much."

"Is everything all right then?"

"Of course, child. Everything's fine. . . . Are you happy?"

"Yes. . . ." A pause. "Cass——"

"Yes?"

"I love him."

I laughed. "Well, that's news!"

When I came back into the kitchen my evening bird was still singing, spilling his melody in the face of the charred universe. "You're surely going to drop dead!" I told him, leaning on my elbows at the window. "You think the world was made for birds, don't you? Imagine the conceit!" The bird stopped his song, cocked his head, and gave me a look. Then tilting full length he swelled his throat again and picked up his song on the precise last note.

Well, foolish to give way to these leapings and sinkings of the heart. The others might tell their grandchildren that

back in the winter of '45 they fought the battle of Champion City. But to the mercenary, the weary Hessian, the battle was unending. What right had I to feelings in the matter? Still, the bird was singing and Nadine had called and it was spring. There for a few minutes I felt fine.

COLLEGE LIBRARY
Date Due
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Due	Returned	Due	Returned
NOV 15 '68 ML	NOV 5 '68		

2-27-62

813.54
D261w

The women of Champion city. main
813.54D261w

3 1262 03220 3860